

I Swear I Won't Bother You AGAIN!



NOVEL
3

WRITTEN BY
Reina Soratani
ILLUSTRATED BY
Haru Harukawa



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Kondo wa zettai ni jama shimasen! Novel 3
by Soratani Reina, Harukawa Haru
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CHARACTERS

MILANIA DIOR

Third-year student at Tanzanite Academy and student council vice president. Claudia's best friend.

CLAUDIA ACRUCIS

First prince of the Kingdom of Durallia and heir to the throne. Third-year student at Tanzanite Academy and student council president.

GIA FORTE

Prince of Sina and Yulan's friend since middle school.

YULAN CUGURS

Violette's childhood friend. Part of a side branch of the royal family and son of the prime minister. First-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

MARIN

The maid who serves Violette.

ROSETTE MEGAN

Princess of the neighboring country of Lithos and second-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

MARYJUNE VAHAN

Second daughter of Duke Vahan. Violette's half sister and first-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

VIOLETTE REM VAHAN

Elderest daughter of Duke Vahan, imprisoned for the attempted murder of her half sister. Sent back in time. Second-year student at Tanzanite Academy.



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Chapter 91: Pandora's Box

LOOKING BACK, all of Violette's most beautiful feelings could

be traced back to Yulan. No matter how corrupted by desire she became, her love for him could never be tarnished. Like a hidden gem buried in the mud, its sparkle could be painted over, but a little polish would restore it...and, indeed, she spent so much time hoarding it like a treasure, she never stopped to examine just what sort of love it was.

To her, it was just something that was always there—affection that sought nothing in return, with no greater objective, that offered her happiness simply by existing. As long as he was happy, so was she. Perhaps that was why she never wanted to define it. If only she'd never discovered the root of her feelings, if only she'd never categorized them, she could have kept cherishing him unconditionally.

"Have you collected yourself, my lady?"

"Yes, I think so. Thank you."

Violette held the mug of warm milk—Marin's specialty—in her hands. It was just warm enough not to burn her heat-sensitive tongue. Light and sweet, it was an essential pick-me-up whenever her spirit was at its lowest.

She could taste Marin's concern, traveling over her tongue and spreading to every inch of her body, healing her emotional wounds. Whenever she drank a cup of this milk before bed, she would fall into a deep, deep sleep—so deep, not even dreams could reach her. How did Marin always seem to know exactly what she needed?

Most people would consider this temperature too tepid to be enjoyable, but to Violette, it was perfect. She took another sip and let out a sigh—not of misery but relief. She thought confessing her feelings would only lead to despair, but now she could see more clearly.

"You should get some rest. I'll bring your dinner to your room," said Marin.

"Could you—"

"Request a smaller portion for tonight? Of course."

“Thank you.”

As it turned out, a state of relaxation was quick to induce hunger or drowsiness, and Violette in particular was inclined to the latter. Gradually, the warmth from the milk made her mind go soft. Add on her recent insomnia and mental fatigue, and her eyelids were already drooping. Before she drifted off completely, she set her mug on the table and then stumbled her way to the bed, her vision pleasantly fuzzy. And when the last of her strength gave out, she could tell from the pillowy softness that embraced her that she had reached her destination.

She felt someone approach, then depart again. Slowly, the light was fading, willing her to succumb to gravity’s pull, and she found the temptation irresistible.

The lid had been lifted on her love, and there was no longer anywhere to hide it. No matter where she tucked it away, like as not, she would find it again. Unable to forget it and wholly lacking the will to dispose of it, she would inevitably embrace it.

And yet, of all the many emotions she found packed in this Pandora’s box—love, obsession, envy, yearning—hope was not one of them.

Chapter 92: Another Peaceful Morning

FOR SOMEONE ELSE in the world, this particular day could have been life-changing. Nevertheless, the sun rose and set. Time ticked by, second after second. Stomachs grew empty, and minds drifted to sleep. No matter the impact of any given day for any given individual, the world kept on turning. Life went on.

In terms of probability, of all the countless uneventful days Violette had survived thus far, at least one of those had ruined someone else's life somewhere. While the whole world woke up, ate, went about their day, and then prepared for bedtime, the possibility for change was always there, invisible to the naked eye. Sure enough, despite Violette's earth-shattering revelation, the next day arrived precisely on schedule.

"Good morning, Lady Violette."

"Morning, Marin."

In some cases, emotional shifts went on to impact the five senses—the power of psychology, it could be said. Perhaps it was because the human heart was nestled in so closely with all the other organs.

The instant someone fell in love, the target of their affections suddenly seemed so *perfect*; conversely, a single minor annoyance could ruin everything. But nothing about the world had changed now that Violette was conscious of her love for Yulan. Her vision wasn't rose-tinted, as was so common in romance novels, nor was her mood abjectly ruined by his absence. To her, this was ordinary—peaceful, but not without melancholy, like every morning before it. All she felt was the same crushing weight that heralded the start of any other day.

With a fresh change of clothes in hand, Marin gazed at her mistress; after a pause, she smiled faintly. "Lady Violette, I just want to say..."

"Yes?"

"I hope you have the chance to speak to Lord Yulan today."

The world was still just as cruel to Violette as ever. Nothing and no one had changed. She knew it was merely the inner workings of her

heart reshaping her vision, and yet...

“I hope so too.”

For some reason, whenever she thought of him, it made her whole world the tiniest bit brighter.

Chapter 93: Levity

HAVING LEFT THE HOUSE at her usual time, Violette arrived at school slightly ahead of the morning rush. When she approached the gates, however, she spotted a beautiful figure standing there. She had but a moment to ponder the novelty of this encounter before the girl in question came dashing over. “Lady Violette!”

“Your Highness...?”

“Good morning!”

“Good morning...? Wh-what are you doing here?” Violette stammered, perplexed. By contrast, Princess Rosette wasn’t ruffled in the least. She was wearing her usual warm smile, clutching her book bag with perfectly manicured hands.

Violette knew there typically weren’t many students on campus this early in the morning. That was partly why she chose this particular time frame to arrive at school—no prying gazes, no ostracism in the classroom, no constant reading of social cues. For that reason, it was far more comfortable than anything she experienced at home.

She didn’t know what sort of morning schedule Rosette followed, but it was obvious that she was making an exception today. After all, this was the only entrance, yet Violette had never previously encountered her here. Clearly their paths had crossed for a reason.

“I was waiting for you, Lady Violette.”

“You were?” Why would she target Violette first thing in the morning, rather than wait for a moment between classes? Was there some sort of urgent crisis? Violette couldn’t fathom what she might possibly need.

Detecting this confusion, Rosette’s shoulders slumped. “You were acting strangely yesterday, and...I thought you might not be well,” she explained.

“Oh...”

All at once, Violette remembered everything that had happened the previous day. Hard to believe she could have forgotten, really, but it

spoke to the intensity of the realization she was having at the time. How had *Rosette* reacted to that visceral emotional breakdown? That was something *Violette* couldn't recall—or more likely, it hadn't registered to begin with. She could remember reassuring *Rosette* that she was okay but not the expression that was on the girl's face.

"Your classmates assured me you sat through all your classes yesterday, but I was worried you might stay home today. They say these things can worsen overnight."

"*That's* why you're here so early?"

"I...I do apologize for ambushing you, of course!"

Now the tables had turned, with *Violette* the more composed of the two. *Rosette* turned away awkwardly, her gaze darting restlessly to and fro. Her pale skin was flushed pink, and the way she pursed her lips was very cute. As the silence lingered, however, her embarrassment only deepened.

"Um, I-I'm sor—"

"Pfft!"

"Huh?"

It was obvious in her expression that she was afraid she'd caused offense, but before she could complete her apology, *Violette* burst out laughing.

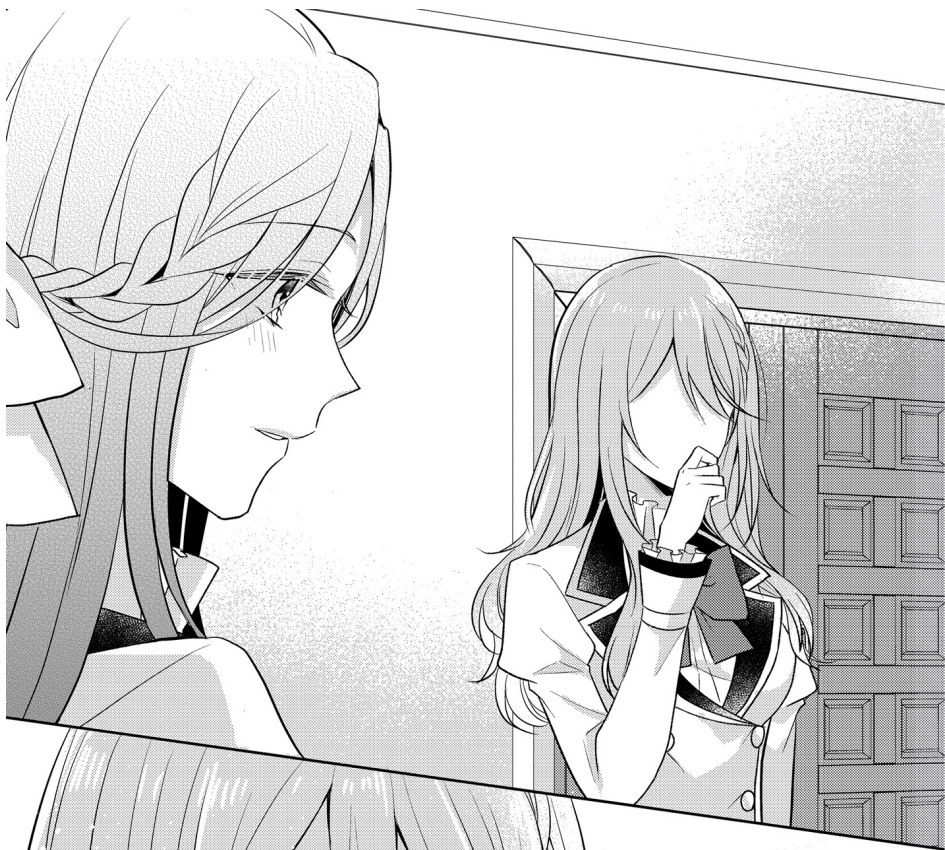
"Hee hee! I'm sorry, I just... Ha ha!"

Not even a modestly placed hand could muffle her mirth; the smile was still visible with her head turned. *Rosette* stared back in surprise until the laughter dwindled. Then, finally, when it came time to convey her utmost sincerity, *Violette* gazed straight into those lavender pupils.

"Thank you... This really means a lot to me."

"Oh! I-I'm so glad!"

The world hadn't changed. Not yesterday, not today, not ever. So really, this was just a belated observation about everyday life. But as it turned out, even *Violette* was permitted to have moments of levity now and then.



Chapter 94: Pretext

NEIGHBORS SUCH AS the mind and body were inseparably linked. When it was easier to breathe, everything felt lighter; when the body broke down, the heart grew weak. *Ill health begins in the mind*, as the saying went.

“Lady Vio? Are you in here?”

“Yes, I’ll be right there!”

At lunch, Violette heard the sound of her name and rose to her feet. The first time it happened, her classmates were just as shocked as she was; in fact, the baffled stares made her downright uncomfortable. By this point, however, it was much easier—the curious eyes were just window dressing. Likewise, Rosette’s gaze was pointed straight at Violette—unwavering, brilliantly confident.

“It’s cold and cloudy today, so perhaps we should eat inside,” said Rosette.

“Yes, I was thinking the same thing, so I put in a salon reservation,” Violette explained. “Sorry, I should have mentioned it.”

“No, don’t be! Thank you so much!”

“I went ahead and ordered some things I thought you’d like, but there should still be time to make adjustments.”

“You needn’t worry about me; I’d rather you make sure to order for yourself!”

“Yes, of course. I hear the dessert of the day is chiffon cake.”

“I’m not speaking of *dessert*... Oh, you’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

“Whatever do you mean, my dear?”

Rosette’s puffed cheeks were the very opposite of threatening, and playing dumb only made them puff up bigger. There was no trace of the tension she’d shown at the beginning of their friendship; in fact, she was openly showing a side to her that many would think surprising. To Violette, however, this was a perfect representation of the adorable girl she was on the inside.

Ten days had passed since Violette had processed her feelings for Yulan. After all that panic and fear and desperate yearning to erase it from her heart, time had afforded her a modicum of composure. Everything she tearfully confessed to Marin was true, of course, but if nothing could be done about these feelings, then her only option was to accept them. Now that she knew where they had taken root, all she could do was ensure that no one ever saw them in full bloom. She would never give them water or sunlight. Instead, she would simply wait for them to wither—for the passage of time to solve the problem where she herself could not.

“Still cloudy,” Rosette murmured sadly as she gazed up at the sky. It didn’t sound like the start of a conversation, but rather, that she spoke aloud without meaning to.

At this, Violette turned her own eyes to the heavens above. The clouds looked full to bursting; if someone were to squeeze them, she suspected they might unleash a torrent not unlike a sopping wet sponge.

“How dreadful. It’ll be raining by the time the final bell rings,” Rosette continued.

“Quite likely,” Violette replied. “Perhaps we should find a different meeting place for today.”

Thus far, they had repurposed the gazebo where they first met as a “secret base” where they could idle away the time after school, but today’s weather was prohibitive. The gazebo was already cold, dark, and shadowy on the best of days. Adding rain to the mix would only amplify those traits.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll think of something,” said Rosette.

“Thank you.”

As they walked, Violette noticed that Rosette’s line of sight was ever so slightly below her own. The difference was only a few centimeters, enough to warrant a lowered gaze but not a tilt of the head, and by all accounts, it should have made idle conversation easier. Yet to Violette, it didn’t feel right. She was used to speaking to someone much taller.

Yulan...

She hadn’t seen nor spoken to him since the day they last awkwardly parted ways. Really, though, ten days wasn’t a significant

length of time. Over the history of their entire friendship, there were many similar instances. In fact, just last year, while Yulan was still in middle school, they hardly saw each other at all.

So why did Violette suddenly want so badly to see his face and hear his voice? Was it the guilt clamoring for her to apologize, or was it her newly identified feelings of infatuation? Did she honestly not know which, or was she turning a blind eye to the answer? Or was it both?

Before she became aware of her feelings, she never would have analyzed herself this much. Ten days ago, what pretext would she have used to visit Yulan? How could one epiphany change so much?

Chapter 95: What Comes Naturally

YULAN WANTED NOTHING MORE than to see Violette, to hear her voice, to speak to her. Some of it could be attributed to anxiety and fear, some of it to sadness and longing... There were a thousand different reasons, but ultimately, what he wanted was to share one more moment with her.

He made a point not to take notes while he investigated. *That* would be tantamount to leaving evidence. If it benefited him to do so, maybe he'd consider it, but there were too many risky variables. For someone who coasted on his reputation, any small mistake would be fatally damaging.

Fortunately, Yulan was blessed with a strong memory. Though there was a lot he wished he could forget, he remembered everything in graphic detail. It had haunted him in the past, but these days, he considered it a talent he was lucky to have. Without it, he never would have acquired this much knowledge.

"You've been spendin' a lotta time in the classroom," Gia remarked.

"Too much hassle to go anywhere, that's all," Yulan replied, his chin in his hands.

"Even to go see your princess?"

Gia perched on Yulan's desk, smirking. At a glance, it might have looked like he was making fun of Yulan, but that wasn't his intention. He had no desire to anger Yulan or spur him to action; his motivation hinged entirely on his own entertainment...or lack thereof, as the case may be.



Gia was the sort of person who only pursued his own interests. He at least had the good sense not to be willfully cruel in the name of fun, but from the perspective of his target, it was infuriating either way. His words struck a nerve right in Yulan's sore spot.

"Now I have even *more* to investigate, all because of you."

"You point fingers like it's going outta style, don'tcha?"

"I acknowledge it was helpful information, but I won't thank you for it."

"You'd save a lotta breath if ya did!" The way Gia guffawed would suggest that Yulan had played right into his hands. He was the only one enjoying this conversation, but he didn't seem to notice or care. He simply sat back and watched as Yulan massaged his temples.

Frankly, this was really starting to grate on Yulan's nerves. His head ached, both from a lack of sleep and a wealth of new puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit together. He knew he could ask for assistance, but it would come at a price. Gia's objective viewpoint often came in handy, but his whims were too unpredictable to be safely relied upon.

"Whatever. So, find anything juicy?" Gia asked.

"You already know the answer to that, don't you?"

"You tell me."

Was it Gia's smarmy expression that rubbed him the wrong way, or was he just tired? The information he'd acquired was beneficial, yes, but it consumed a lot of brainpower vetting its credibility and deciding how best to use it. With more to do, less time to sleep, and nothing to show for it, the stress was getting to him. At this point, no amount of reading or listening was going to help him get anywhere.

"I think it's time."

He had gathered all he could gather. He had thought it through. Now all that remained...

"Welp, try not to get caught!"

"Who do you take me for?"

"A real funny guy! Funny in the head, that is."

"Pot, meet kettle."

If anyone at this school ran counter to the norm, it was Gia.

People all around the world saw those from Sina as wild cards. Yet their prince was trying to say there was something wrong with *Yulan*?

He knew he was something of an anomaly in the system, but as far as he was concerned, he operated well within the bounds of common sense. It just so happened that his love, devotion, and priorities were focused entirely on one person: his beloved Violette, whom he so dearly wished to rescue from misery. And to that end, he would do *anything*—no matter who got hurt in the process.

Chapter 96: His Smile

WAS IT ARROGANT to claim that she knew this would happen? “Predicted” didn’t feel right, nor did “expected.” But if she were asked to try to describe the feeling...Rosette *knew* he would come find her.

“Good day to you, Lady Rosette.”

“Good day, sir.”

His softly twinkling eyes, curved lips, and gentle voice came together to form an affable, affectionate expression, carefully cultivated so as to be charming. Indeed, anyone who saw it would think him friendly, especially the person at whom it was pointed. Surely Rosette herself was meant to feel this way too.

So why did her blood run cold?

Over the course of her life, she had experienced more than her fair share of affection; in fact, the opposite was quite rare. As a result, she had grown attuned to those emotions. Her antenna was quick to detect how others saw her, how they felt about her, and what they wanted from her.

Therefore, she knew this couldn’t be a fluke. His smile was too perfect to carry the meaning it would otherwise suggest. Instead, it was more readily compared to a beast baring its fangs, poised to strike.

Experience warned her not to back down. Even without concrete proof, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if she took even a single step away from this terrifying smile, it would be her last. As suspicion threatened to creep its way into her expression, she deepened her smile until it was just as perfect as his. Rosette was used to faking it; it was an important skill to have in one’s repertoire, even if it wasn’t always wise to give affection freely. Times like these, it came in handy.

“You weren’t expecting me to strike up a conversation, were you?” he asked. “I’m sorry for startling you.”

“No, that’s not true, actually,” she answered calmly.

At this, his expression faltered the barest fraction—proof that she had gotten under his skin, however slightly. That being said, it wasn’t as

effective as she anticipated; neither his mask nor his confidence slipped.

“So you *were* expecting me, were you? My humblest apologies for underestimating you, Your Highness,” Yulan continued, and it was all too obvious that he was being patronizing. *I’m amazed the pretty princess actually has a brain*, he seemed to say.

His perpetual smile belied a guile that would prey upon her the very instant she let herself be deceived by his flawless facade. Indeed, she could tell from the way it never wavered that he didn’t trust her in the slightest, that he knew she realized this, and that she couldn’t afford to waver either.

“Goodness, I thought you *wanted* me to take notice,” she replied.

There was likely no point in parrying. Provocation, sympathy, persuasion—these things wouldn’t work on someone who carried no emotion toward her. Anger was easy to handle, but apathy was the trickiest and most terrifying of all.

With his textbook smile untarnished by annoyance, Yulan slowly tilted his head, as if to suggest he hadn’t the faintest idea what Rosette was referring to. Clearly he wasn’t going to reveal his hand until she struck bullseye herself. So be it.

“Considering you’ve been interrogating half the school about me, I had thought your methods rather indirect.”

“Oh, I never meant to interrogate. But they all seem so very fond of you, Your Highness. I couldn’t help but wonder why that might be.”

“To me it seemed rather more like a flagrant violation of boundaries.”

“Then I must apologize for having offended you.”

Was it presuming too much to believe that this readily given apology was the furthest thing from genuine? Before this moment, she would have attested that actions spoke louder than words, and yet her gut instinct was now decrying the very same values she’d cultivated all her life. In *his* case, there was simply no such thing as sincerity.

Then, as if to validate this hypothesis, the degenerate sneered.

“Truth be told, I had to wonder why *Prince Claudia’s fiancée* would suddenly choose to associate with Violette.”

And his golden eyes, revered as sacred by so many, darkened with

what looked like malice.

Chapter 97: Stepping Stone or Obstacle

“**W**HERE DID YOU hear that?”

“Ah, so it’s *not* just a rumor.”

Her visible panic did nothing to delight him; he didn’t seem proud of himself for blindsiding her. Instead, he nodded casually, like all he really sought was the answer to an ordinary question. But Rosette no longer had the mental capacity to feel annoyance at Yulan’s wanton disregard for social etiquette. The subject he broached was a secret of utmost importance to her—and one that only the highest-ranking members of their two monarchies were supposed to know.

“Secrets are hard to keep. The heavier they are, the more tempting it is to ask someone to help you carry them. And when the rules of confidentiality are so rigid, it can be surprisingly easy to break them,” he explained.

At any given time, the human mouth was awaiting its moment to speak, especially when burdened with a secret too large to manage single-handedly. It was human nature to want to share with others, to form a mutual understanding—and the more

straitlaced the individual, the easier they caved. Yulan was well versed in unraveling that type of person, thread by thread. This wasn’t a talent he was born with, but rather, one he honed as a survival skill. He never hesitated to make use of it.

Rosette felt her blood run cold, but she refused, above all else, to look away, for that would give Yulan exactly what he wanted. Instead, she fought her own instincts and looked directly into his unreadable eyes. “It’s not too terribly different from a rumor, if I’m honest. We haven’t formally exchanged vows.”

Even supposing word *did* get around, there was no way to prove it. When it came down to it, two kings from two different monarchies had simply agreed upon what was most beneficial for their kingdoms. An engagement between their children had the most upsides and the least downsides. Assuming neither found a more suitable candidate in the near future, the news would eventually be made public. At present,

however, it wasn't set in stone.

She couldn't stand meddling, nor the uncharitable curiosity of the uninvolved, nor the discord and distrust sown as a result. Rumors were one thing, but more and more people were bound to ask her directly, as Yulan had. It would be all too easy to deny it, but if she wanted to avoid outright lying, it would require tremendous effort—and she was already burdened with maintaining their idealized image of her.

"It bothers me to think such unreliable information is going around. Precisely who was it that—?"

"Ah, I think, perhaps, you misunderstand me."

Yulan stooped down slightly to reach her eye level, affording her a clearer look at his expression. This, despite him having reduced his own stature, was somehow *more* intimidating. Almost like he was flaunting the emptiness of his smile, right up close.

"I don't really care who he chooses. Whether it's you or someone else, I'm not interested in the least." As long as they didn't interfere with his plan, hinder his objective, or destroy Violette's chance at happiness, of course. "By all means, arrange your marriage and run your kingdoms how you see fit because that part doesn't matter. Not to me."

Once Claudia was king, Yulan would surely serve a crucial supporting role under him and his future bride, yet he claimed not to care who became queen? Even if the outcome wasn't directly under his control, surely abject apathy was unwise. Wasn't that why he approached Rosette in this fashion to begin with? She couldn't comprehend the first thing about this boy. But when she looked him in the eye and saw the glint of gold, she could easily infer his position.

Yulan, however, was focused on something far beyond Rosette's inference. To him, what mattered most was the possibility that Violette would find out and get hurt.

"I'm only going to ask this once: was it truly pure coincidence that brought you and Lady Violette together?"



Chapter 98: Behind Her Back

“**W**HAT?”

Unable to grasp the intent behind the question, Rosette’s voice dropped flatly. What else, if not coincidence, could it have possibly been? For that matter, Violette was no ignorant child; she was raised as a daughter of nobility, with all the baggage that entailed. Supposing Rosette *had* been plotting something malicious, surely the girl wasn’t so daft as to blindly go along with it, never sensing a thing.

All that aside, Rosette saw no reason for Yulan to be this accusatory. He was overprotective to the point of hostility.

“Obviously I’m aware that she had feelings for Prince Claudia.”

The whole school knew of Violette’s twisted love, Claudia’s subsequent lack of enthusiasm for it...and her recent, sudden change of attitude as well. Everyone assumed that she was too busy with her present family situation to have time for romance—a theory which wasn’t entirely off the mark, but no one dared ask for direct confirmation.

Suffice it to say, *everyone* knew full well what she used to be like.

But Rosette was technically Violette’s romantic rival. Naturally, since the news had yet to be announced, Violette was unaware of this; meanwhile, Rosette chose to continue smiling and laughing and playing the part of a good friend. As for Yulan, he wasn’t so naive as to disregard this little detail. If anything, his protectiveness over Violette had intensified to an unhealthy degree.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what you’re getting at,” she continued.

“That statement proves to me that you understand perfectly well.” There was a pause. “I understand your caution, Your Highness, but seeing as I’ve already followed the trail back to you, I should think it a futile effort. Wouldn’t you?”

Creepy was her first instinct. He had observed her every move and targeted her weak point with pinpoint precision. Slowly but surely, it

felt like he was backing her off a cliff. While his lips and tone of voice remained cordial, his eyes and words were laced with barbs, and it was infuriating. He dared to trample all over her with his blatant suspicion and hostility—no respect given.

She could tell it was all motivated by love and concern, but even then, his methods were unbearably self-absorbed. He was using Violette as a shield in his moral crusade. And Rosette would have none of it.

“Allow me to rephrase, then: I have nothing to say to you.” In his silence, she continued, “This is between Lady Vio and myself. Whatever we feel for each other, whatever we discuss, whatever sort of friendship we build, it belongs to *us*. Not you.”

If meddling was tasteless when it came to romance, then surely the same applied to friendship as well. The more one cared for someone, the easier it was to worry, certainly. But that was no justification for sabotage. While many considered it a virtue to read between the lines, there came a point when the subject’s lack of direct involvement became rather telling. Danger, distrust, perceived asymmetry... In the hands of an uninvolved third party, these “reasons” were just guesses. There was no truth to be had.

“You are perfectly free to think what you want and conduct yourself accordingly, as is your prerogative. But...could I trouble you to spare Lady Vio from your compulsive need for control?”

Chapter 99: High Ground

***I** F I COULD MAKE ONE WISH, with the knowledge that it would be granted...*

Admittedly, Yulan had written Rosette off as some spoiled, sheltered princess; he had expected her mental fortitude to correspond with that of her petite, waifish frame. But he wasn't going to try to justify his scorn or caution. If he could make a statement in his defense, it was that this princess was someone Violette had chosen, and Violette was both sensitive and oblivious in the worst of ways.

Yulan had started this investigation based on the possibility that Violette was the target of carefully concealed malice, and the more he learned, the more suspicious he became. Rosette was tied to the prince; they were betrothed in secret. That was a tidbit Yulan only acquired by fully exploiting his unique position in the system, so Violette herself couldn't possibly know.

How would she feel if she found out? Sad? Resentful? Would it quietly destroy her? No matter the cause, Yulan was loath to let a single shadow pass over her beautiful features. That was what brought him before Rosette to offer a word of warning. While she might not have realized her secret had been leaked if he hadn't outright told her, he had expected that she would hear of him sniffing around at the very least. What caught him off guard was how obnoxious she was to deal with.

A need for control? Yes. Though the smarter move was to deny it, he could easily see that inclination within himself. Whether it was the general discomfort of binding rules or the perpetual boot on his neck, he wasn't sure. But either way, he had developed an overly strong aversion toward being controlled. The reason he operated behind a veneer of perpetual friendliness was because it enabled him to worm his way more easily into the hearts of others. This, in turn, made them easier to manipulate—like pawns on a chessboard, carrying out his bidding.

Well, she's got me pegged.

That their first interaction featured such biting commentary on his subconscious nature was a surprise, but it didn't anger him. If her estimation was off the mark it might have elicited his displeasure, but he was indeed every ounce the person she described. It simply hadn't occurred to him until now.

Yulan was arrogant; he despised being someone else's puppet, so he aspired to be a puppeteer himself. Darkness wriggled in his veins like insects battling for dominance. He could only imagine what the average person would think of his filthy, tainted soul, though he didn't care to mend his ways.

But now Rosette had seen the poison lurking inside the boy known as Yulan Cugurs—the cunning fox whose gentle embrace concealed a hand at her throat. She realized that what most people saw as harmless sweet candy was in fact a potent drug that could possess the mind. He couldn't deny the truth of it, nor would he try, for her aim had struck true.

“You're not wrong, but...you're not quite right.”

Yulan was someone who yearned to be in control. That much was accurate. But at the same time, he was a slave to Violette. In order to surrender his heart to his mistress, there was something he needed to obtain, and his every action was in service to that ambition. In order to keep her tucked safely away in the castle he had built, he would gladly retaliate against any who sought to harm her.

“All I want is for Lady Violette to live a happy life.”

“Surely you're not going to pretend this is for *her* benefit, are you?” Rosette's eyes narrowed in contempt. She must have imagined Yulan swaggering with self-importance, conjuring up a justification for his selfish actions, and turning a blind eye to all responsibility while greedily reaping the rewards.

She's even more predictable than I thought. No, that's not it. She's... like me.

Yulan had thought of Rosette as a benevolent philanthropist, the polar opposite of himself in every way, someone with whom he could never see eye to eye—a princess who loved all things good and kind. But behind the mask, he spied a glimpse of a girl who resembled him far more than he ever expected. Truly, it was a blessing in disguise. If she had no motive to harm Violette, then all was well. In fact, he was

downright *delighted* that Rosette would take umbrage at him on Violette's behalf. The disgust he felt was not directed at her.

"Perish the thought, Your Highness. The benefit is entirely my own."

Yulan was a deeply greedy and egotistical person. He wasn't so altruistic as to act on behalf of another. He sought happiness for Violette because he knew it would lead to his own; deep down, his heart saw the two as one and the same.

He knew, of course, that everyone else would think him ridiculous. If he recounted his views to a specialist, he might walk away diagnosed with some sort of disorder—and considering his lack of concern in this regard, they might even force him into treatment. But if sitting idly by and only helping when asked was "right," then Yulan was content to be wrong. He would sooner lay out the path in secret and let Violette believe she had chosen it of her own accord.

Yes, Rosette inarguably had the moral high ground. But when did the high ground ever do anything for Violette?

Chapter 100: An Encounter in Passing

A GAIN AND AGAIN, he remembered. Night after night, he saw

it in his dreams. He could beat them to a bloody pulp and it still wouldn't be enough to quench the hatred, the animosity, the enmity, the rage.

Yulan was haunted by memories of a past that no longer existed. If this was his curse—his price to pay—then it was doing its job, because he couldn't imagine a punishment more successful at breaking his spirit.

On the day Violette was dragged to hell, the moment the halfwits shrugged off their own crimes to pin it all on her, Yulan felt ashamed of himself for ever believing in God. He realized how worthless and powerless he truly was. And he vowed to get revenge.

Rosette knew next to nothing about Yulan, and yet the self-deprecation in his smile struck her as oddly fitting. But why? It was a stark departure from the tension of moments prior. His bangs cast a deep shadow over his dull, lifeless eyes glittering gold with desire, yet she could feel ire dripping from his every pore. In this country, golden eyes were considered sacred, but to her, they were the mark of a demon or perhaps the Grim Reaper himself. She'd never see them the same way ever again.

"Well, now that you've answered my question, I shall excuse myself."

"What?"

Disregarding Rosette's confusion, Yulan switched back to the casual tone he had used at the beginning, suggesting he had lost all interest in her. Then he turned away with nary a shred of hesitation. The last thing she saw of him was his fake smile plastered firmly in place. It was so convincing, she half wondered if she'd merely

hallucinated the rest.

He hadn't threatened her into keeping mum, likely because he didn't see the need to do so—specifically because Rosette had no bargaining chips. She had the barest knowledge of him, whereas his investigation of her left no stone unturned; that much was implied by the fact that he knew of her secret engagement. All that aside, he seemed to have found some acceptable answer to his suspicions about her, so there was no need to stop him from leaving. Not that Rosette herself was much eager to continue the conversation with someone of his ilk besides.

“I wonder if Lady Vio knows...”

From the way he spoke of her, Yulan was quite close with Violette; that, or perhaps it was a delusion of his own making. Taking into account his instability, neither was particularly reassuring. Ideally Rosette wanted Violette to reevaluate her taste in friends, but that would make her attitude toward Yulan awfully hypocritical. The uninvolved had no right to criticize a relationship between two people. If neither party sent out an SOS, then the right course was to keep any fears or worries to oneself.

I should be afraid of him, and yet...

He was an intensely intimidating person, enough to freeze her in her tracks. There was a madness to him—the sort of reckless lunacy that would drive a man to plunge into the depths of hell—and yet Rosette couldn't bring herself to label him a threat to be feared. Was it the self-loathing she glimpsed under his thin veneer of confidence?

He was not someone she could trust, and she suspected the feeling was mutual. Their only tenuous connection was a mutual friend they both wanted to cherish; without Violette, they wouldn't even have *that*. So was their encounter one that sprang from fortune, or would it prove to be a hindrance? Rosette suspected she would soon find out.

Chapter 101: Farewell, My First Love

THE SMELL OF INK, the scratching of pens, stacks of paper piled high. Together, they repeated the same motions over and over. There was no conversation, only mutterings scarcely loud enough to constitute a whisper. Two people doing their work, seated at a distance that prevented either of them from reading the other's expression. This was not a peaceful moment, but the air was still.

Between them, there was once an unrequited love—so how was their connection best described now that it was gone?

After school, Violette was trying to prolong her stay on campus when Claudia happened to spot her. Now he sat at his office desk while she sat on the lounge sofa, each of them focused on paperwork.

Today, Milania was away handling other matters, and he and Claudia had yet to formally recruit anyone else into the fold. Although they were evidently already learning to manage the entire workload between the two of them, some things required more pairs of hands. Accordingly, Violette was once again invited to help, and once again, she agreed. They would just barely make today's quota between the two of them. Fatigue was etched into every crease in Claudia's brow as he glared down at his stack of papers.



“Why don’t we take a short break, Your Highness?” Violette suggested.

Claudia barely glanced in her direction before reaching for the call bell on the desk. “Are you tired? I’ll call for—”

“No, *you* are tired, my lord,” she cut in, rising to her feet.

She, the part-time assistant, was decidedly *not* the one who needed rest—not when Claudia was having such obvious difficulties juggling everything. Knowing his personality, he likely scoffed at the idea of pausing mid-task, but the exhaustion was liable to negatively impact his judgment. Instead of wearing oneself down in a single stretch, it was often more efficient to allow for a moment of respite.

“At this rate, you’ll only waste *more* time on corrections after the fact. I recommend you put your work on hold for a short time or perhaps even take a nap.”

After she finished calling in the steward stationed outside to request warm drinks and snacks, she looked over her shoulder at him and found him staring back in wide-eyed surprise, still struggling to process what she had said. It reminded her of Yulan whenever she caught him off guard.

Yulan...

It was hardly surprising that the two resembled each other. They likely had dozens of things in common, too small for either of them to notice. Prior to now, she never would have noticed any shared attributes—if anything, she would have looked for traces of Claudia in Yulan, not the other way around. And foolish though it was, every time she found one, her feelings would grow.

No matter where she was, she would always look for Claudia; no matter who she was with, she thought of him. He was seared into her brain. All her five senses yearned for him. Her love for him was a permanent fixture, burning brightly all day and night. She convinced herself that her obsession and desperation was a natural part of infatuation, then threw more gasoline on the fire, all the while believing that a happy romance was waiting for her somewhere in the flaming wreckage.

“Fine. A short break,” Claudia conceded as the tea set was wheeled in.

After he heaved himself to his feet, he walked to the sofa across from Violette and sat down, awkwardly averting his gaze. It was a surprisingly timid gesture, considering the confidence with which he usually carried himself. After a sip of hot tea, he let out a long breath. He was likely far more exhausted than he realized, so a little relaxation was bound to help. At the very least, his brow was no longer quite as furrowed. Relieved, Violette took a sip from her own cup.

In the past, she only *dreamed* of having a peaceful tea break with Prince Claudia. Back then, it was something she craved with every fiber of her being, yet now that it was happening, it was nothing like she'd imagined. This never would have happened back when she was obsessed with him. She was so desperate in her pursuit, she blindly trampled over all kinds of opportunities.

But Violette had changed. She had abandoned her dreams and mindset, praying instead to spend the next year as invisible as air...and *this* was the result. If she could achieve this, surely something similar was possible for the old Violette too. Only now was she able to look back in hindsight and see all the things she had refused to accept. Identifying her feelings for Yulan had brought along with it all sorts of other epiphanies.

"Your Highness?"

"Hm?"

Violette lowered her cup and bowed her head. "I just wanted to say...I sincerely regret all the trouble I've caused you in the time we've known each other, and I'm sorry."

In light of all her misdeeds, she should have offered this apology much sooner, but only now was she finally able to come to grips with her own wrongdoing. That being said, she didn't solely blame herself; it was the only option she thought she had, and thus she considered herself a victim of circumstance. Of course, it could be argued that she only felt sorry for herself, or felt powerless to escape the environment she was in, but considering her family situation, she would never fully regret her past actions. Deep in her chest, tiny embers still smoldered with resentment, blaming *them* for everything that had happened.

The way she had treated Claudia, however, was another story; the fault was entirely hers. It was perfectly reasonable to turn down unwanted advances, and she was out of line for violating his boundaries time and time again. No matter how hard her life was, no matter how

much she suffered on a daily basis, she had no right to take it out on an innocent third party.

All this time, she had staunchly ignored the ugliest parts of herself, pretending they weren't there. She didn't want to accept that she was the kind of villain who, long after being sent to prison, still stubbornly insisted she had done nothing wrong. She didn't want to think about why she blamed everyone except herself for her crime and resultant conviction, and she certainly didn't want others to see that side of her either. But there was no one left to criticize her for those actions now. Only Violette remembered that timeline, and as such, *this* Claudia knew nothing of her gravest sin.

Nevertheless, she wanted to apologize, purely for her own peace of mind. It was a gesture of kindness toward herself rather than him. She wanted to put an end to those old feelings and move on with her life, lest her soul remain trapped in that prison cell forever.

No longer could she spend each day alone, shrugging her shoulders and letting life happen to her while she waited for the end. Now she had someone she wanted to spend it with, hand in hand—and if she couldn't have that, then at the very least, she wanted to spend it caring for him.

And so she vowed to close the curtain on her doomed first love.

Chapter 102: The Best Goodbye

DID THE END always come so quietly? Claudia had rather thought it would be more...painful, miserable, solemnly bitter, the sort of memory they would always look back on with a tiny fragment of regret. He thought both parties would come away in pieces.

“I just wanted to say...I sincerely regret all the trouble I’ve caused you in the time we’ve known each other, and I’m sorry,” said Violette.

At what point did he start to see beauty in how she looked him square in the eyes? Scan around for her whenever he walked across campus? Or feel the impulse to speak to her whenever he spotted her? This feeling was not ever-present, nor did it clog his mind. If anything, it was the memory of the way it was before—stressful days spent carefully on guard—that haunted him. And yet, what he felt now was more complicated by far.

“I won’t ask you to forgive me for what I’ve done; I couldn’t possibly,” she continued. “But I swear I won’t bother you again.”

Each syllable she uttered sank deep into his brain. Part of him didn’t want to listen, but another part of him dreaded missing a single word—presumably for the same reason. A voice in his head willed him not to process it, but when he looked into her eyes, he couldn’t stop himself. His chest tightened ever so slightly, like a gentle fist around his heart. Truly it was a bittersweet sensation.

“I understand that my word is not worthy of your trust, so I won’t ask for it. I just wanted to...set the record,” she explained.

Claudia remembered a similar exchange that took place on the day he first invited Violette into this very room. It was a day he’d surely never forget. Like today, it was just the two of them, and though they had arguably grown closer, the distance between them was more palpable than ever.

Now that he could no longer sense her ardor for him, he had gained a sense of relief, followed next by feelings of affection for the intelligent girl she was at her core. Then he discovered her most adorable smile. He didn’t want to know or think about it, yet he

intrinsically understood that the potential for this outcome had always been there. If only he'd never noticed, his life would have been easier; if only he'd noticed sooner, a day like today would never have had to happen.

But if Violette had never relinquished her feelings for him, this path would likely never have opened.

"I trust you," he replied.

He wanted a reason—no, a *pardon*. He wasn't under attack, of course, but were he to offer an explanation... With all his pride, he couldn't bear to admit that the same vexing girl he once loathed was now so beautiful to him. His eyes, his ears, his limbs—they needed a proper pretext to set their bearings for Violette.

Was it her perfect posture? The way her eyes twinkled when she smiled? Her flawless table manners whenever she ate? How expressive her face became when something was on her mind? Her resignation to the status quo? That there was only one name she could call out with full confidence?

He could craft a thousand reasons, but every one of them drove home the truth that his feelings held no real value. He knew now that he'd been narrow-minded, but it was too late. Should he have acted on these feelings? Cast aside his reputation, his obligations, his dignity, to follow his heart? Would it have changed anything? Perhaps then he would have had the chance to tell her how he felt before it was over.

Alas, that was never an option. From birth, a prince was honor-bound to *uphold* his reputation, *heed* his obligations, and *retain* his dignity. It was his duty and privilege. The moment he abandoned those things, he would cease to be Prince Claudia.

"I trust you, for I know...I understand full well that...that you are worthy of it," he stammered.

Yes, this was surely the correct course. The curtain would fall quietly, with neither of them damaged in the process. As for why he still yearned to peek through the gap in the fabric, well, perhaps he was simply unskilled at letting go. *Why didn't I—why didn't she—why not earlier—why so soon?* But the cacophony in his mind did little to dispel the beauty before him.

"Th-thank you, my lord."

A smile spread slowly on her face—yet another that he was lucky to witness. No amount of them would lend any significance to his feelings, yet he found himself cherishing every single one. How ironic, how *pathetic* that things should end this way. Verily a tragic fate for a man who failed to notice what was in his possession until the moment it slipped through his fingers. Were it a novel, he would have tossed the book into the trash.

And yet...was there truly no value in the beauty he had discovered? In this budding flower that refused to wilt? Be it an ironic fate or a sad excuse for a love story, was it not still special to him? As sad and painful and miserable as it was, was it not still poignant?

So what was the perfect way to bring their private farewell to a close? If *I'm sorry* didn't fit, and *thank you* wasn't quite right, then perhaps the best goodbye was...

"I'm glad it was you."

You were my first love.

Chapter 103: Home Is by Your Side

A FEELING OF TREMENDOUS LOSS overshadowed any relief Violette would otherwise have felt. The guilt—the *memories*—had taken up a great deal of space inside her, and though she wouldn't miss them, her feelings for him were once special to her, even if it was never truly love.

"I apologize for keeping you so late," said Claudia. "Will you have a ride home?"

"Yes, my chauffeur always picks me up around this time."

And so it was decided that Violette would head home before sunset. He offered to walk her to the front gates, but naturally she declined. There was a sense of levity in the air between them, strange and amusing in equal measure.

Though she had put an end to the romance, the future of their connection was as of yet undetermined...or *unclear*, perhaps. Due to the unique circumstances that initially brought them together, neither of them knew how to change course, so instead they held each other at arm's length. They weren't quite friends, but they had shared too many interactions at this point to revert to strangers—something that would have been all too easy for the old Violette. Now that one-sided desire had morphed into mutual respect, there was suddenly no easy way to describe their relationship.

"I...I'd like to ask you something," he began suddenly, "but first, I must preface it by saying that this is not an order, nor is it a request. You are free to choose as you see fit."

His hesitancy and lack of eye contact gave her pause. For someone usually so well spoken, this sort of disclaimer was hardly necessary. He saw the question in her eyes—either that, or he finally found his courage, because he let out a long, slow breath and brought his gaze level with hers.

"Would you have any interest in joining the student council?"

"...What?"

"In all the many times you have assisted us, you have displayed an

exemplary speed and accuracy in your work. I trust you on a personal level, and your pedigree is sure to be satisfactory.”

Claudia’s reasons to recruit her were logical—and truthful, too, as far as he was concerned. Judging by the confusion on Violette’s face, however, they were not enough to convince her. It was clear to him that she lacked self-confidence. But at the same time, there was something else he had yet to mention...something that he had kept in mind ever since the first day he invited her here to work together...

“Besides, if you worked for the student council, you...you’d have any number of reasons to stay on campus after school.”

From the very beginning, he had sensed her discomfort with the prospect of going home. Ever since word spread about her new family members, there were a few occasions in which he had noticed her lost in thought with an expression that was...less than pleased. Naturally, he had never asked her about it himself, so he couldn’t say for sure how her new stepmother and half sister had impacted life at the Vahan estate. All he knew was that he had seen her sitting alone after school with only the courtyard flowers for company.

So when he contemplated how he might be of some assistance, he struck upon a brilliant idea. Truly, he wasn’t so noble as to offer it purely for her sake—this stood to benefit him as well. Frankly, he was in no position to offer his aid unconditionally, nor would she accept his charity if he did.

“Of course, the position comes with its fair share of responsibilities,” he explained. “It would be a considerable time commitment, and you’d have a much larger workload than what you handled today. In all honesty, the student council would profit from your membership far more than you would.” There was a pause, and then he continued, “You don’t have to decide right this moment. Take some time to consider it...though keep in mind I *will* need an answer in the near future.”

“I-I’ll think about it,” Violette stammered, though she still sounded confused, and her gaze wandered unsteadily. He felt guilty to have flustered her, but there wasn’t much he could do about it.

Given how she had changed in recent weeks, he had half expected her to decline immediately. The fact that she hadn’t was something of a relief. “Now then, do take care on your way home,” he told her.

“I will, Your Highness. Likewise, try not to overexert yourself.”

Claudia returned Violette’s concern with a self-deprecating smile, then disappeared back into the student council office. She could only imagine the mountains of work left for him to handle; they would need more hands on deck if the prince was going to get any rest anytime soon. It made sense, then, that he would try to recruit her to the team.

In the past, she would have jumped at the chance to join the student council, blind to how much work it would entail. Yes, it was all too easy to picture how it would have played out for her back then. She would have seen the invitation as a free pass to get away with anything. From her current perspective, she understood that it wasn’t that simple. She could see how exhausted the two of them were, struggling with a workload that never seemed to shrink. But if they were honestly so desperate for help that *anyone* would suffice, then perhaps it was a good idea to take up the mantle and atone for the trouble she’d caused.

She was no longer the girl she once was, and besides, the prospect of staying late was an appealing one. If Prince Claudia approved of her, then clearly she had earned the right to join. He was the compassionate sort, yes, but not so foolish as to offer out of pity. The arrangement would benefit both parties. Nevertheless...there was one thing that kept her from taking the plunge...

“Welcome home, Vio.”

Golden eyes twinkled at her from the windowsill, shadowed by long eyelashes. His smile was beautiful, adorable, soft, and sweet—yes, perhaps it was he who first taught her that smiles were reassuring. She had always found the spectrum of human emotion rather frightening, after all.

“Oh, wait... I guess this isn’t exactly *home*, is it?”

“What are you talking about? Of course it is.” No matter where she was or who she was with, *this* was where she belonged. “I’m glad to be home, Yulan.”

Would he smile if he knew what she would turn down just to be with him?

Chapter 104: The Moral Good

IN THIS CASE, the phrase *long time no see* was surely too dramatic to be applicable. Still, it felt like Violette and Yulan had spent an eternity apart—a testament to how badly she had wanted to see him again. It wasn't enough to greet him in passing; now they stood in the corner of a relatively deserted hallway, chatting casually, within arm's reach of each other, and it was *sublime*. To her, this one corner was her entire world.

"I see you haven't gone home yet," she commented.

"Yeah, because I knew you were still around," he replied.

"Oh? Did you need me for something?"

"No, I just thought I'd wait for you."

He grinned amiably, same as always. Most likely, this was the person he had always been on the inside—in fact, it was downright rare to see him angry. Now that her feelings had shifted ever so slightly, however, everything she'd always taken for granted suddenly seemed *sacred*... Did love do this to everyone, or just her?

Every gesture carried a special significance; every word weighed on her heart, piling up and making it swell. But she found she rather enjoyed the feeling—like she was nurturing a plant to grow stronger and healthier than any other. Of course, being that love was not visible to the naked eye, one might wonder how she expected to compare hers to anyone else's. She remained confident that hers was the greatest of all, nonetheless.

"So where were you? I looked all over the place and couldn't find you."

"Oh, um...I was in the student council office."

For the briefest of moments, her lips visibly twitched...and a split second later, she cursed herself for not thinking of a cover story. Though *she* could all too easily dismiss Claudia's presence, the same was not true of Yulan. How had he felt, watching his dear friend campaign so madly—and so poorly—to win the prince's affections? He must have

been worried about her or quite possibly disgusted that she would want to get close to Claudia at all. She was far too blind with arrogance to realize it at the time.

“I was asked to lend a hand, so I did, and...I apologized for my past behavior.”

“Huh?”

“I wanted to make it clear that I regret the way I previously conducted myself.”

In contrast to Violette’s sunny relief, Yulan was clearly flummoxed, his eyes darting in all directions. His shimmering gold irises were reminiscent of Claudia’s, but at the same time, they were completely different. Comparing Yulan with someone else made it all the more plain that her feelings for him were special. She was in love.

“I’ve been thinking about a lot of things—about myself, and my actions, and how I made other people feel,” she explained. “All this time, I never stopped to think about any of it, and now that I finally have...I’ve realized just how important it is to look at the whole picture. Before now, I was honestly oblivious.”

Lately Violette’s mind was a mess. While it was easier than she realized to confront all the things she had suppressed, it was also far more exhausting. Still, now that she had a goal in mind, she had no intention of putting her feet up. She wasn’t trying to *change herself* or anything so lofty as that; she merely wanted to find a reason to be with him and to chip away at all the reasons she couldn’t. Like any lovestruck girl, she wanted him to see only her best attributes and none of the flaws.

“And I wanted to apologize to you, too, Yulan... I’m sorry for my rude behavior when we last met.”

“You could never be rude to me. Though I admit I *was* worried about you.”

Yulan was a good person, kindness his default. But Violette was no such saint. She only thought to examine her failings in an attempt to be worthy of him, and accordingly, one could argue she hadn’t truly mended her ways. Alas, she was too jaded now to ever put stock in the inherent goodness of man. There was no gallant hero who rode in to help everyone out of the kindness of his heart—there was only luck and calculated self-interest. To those who suffered in isolation, the “moral

good” was worthless if it couldn’t improve their circumstances.

“I’ve done so many terrible things, Yulan—far worse than you can possibly know. I’ve crossed a line that must never be crossed. I am a wicked person, and I cannot pretend otherwise.”

To Violette, it was her dark past, but in this timeline, no one knew of her most evil deed, for it had never taken place. As such, she didn’t dare speak of the details to *anyone*, lest it tarnish their view of her. But by this point, she could safely say she was no longer homicidal. While she couldn’t pretend there were no hard feelings, all she wanted now was to avoid her sister as much as humanly possible.

Nevertheless, she inched ever closer to revealing it—all because she wanted him to know. She wanted to lay herself bare at the outset so her ugliness wouldn’t come as a disappointment later. She knew it was a defense mechanism, but even then...was it such a crime to ask him to stay?

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea about me, Vio.”

As her gaze drifted downward, she saw him rise to his feet, and her shoulders stiffened as she braced herself for whatever he was about to say. Just above them, however, two large hands cupped her ears through her hair. Startled, she looked up. His face was now scarcely centimeters from hers...so close, their foreheads might touch...and he was smiling.

“I don’t care if you’re good or evil or somewhere in between,” he whispered, like it was a secret only she could know. His sweet voice penetrated her ears and sank deep into her heart. “None of that matters to me.”

Yulan never admired heroes the way everyone else did. He never dreamed of protecting the weak—because when he was little, he had enough on his plate trying to protect *himself*. To this day, he still felt the same. But after meeting Violette, one thing changed...

“I don’t believe in justice, Vio. I only believe in you.”

He wanted to be *her* hero and no one else’s.

Chapter 105: Goddess

YULAN WOULD ALWAYS be there for Violette, no matter what happened, no matter who turned against her, no matter who or what she clung to in return.

By the time Yulan arrived at home, the sky had lost much of its light. But he always came home around this time, so no one was worried, and only a single servant greeted him upon his return. He'd see his family later tonight at dinner.

His adoptive parents were good-natured, easygoing, generous, and understanding. They typically preferred to mind their own business. Not to suggest they were entirely apathetic, but rather, they knew where to draw the line between themselves and others. From the perspective of a guy like Yulan, who generally regarded those around him with either hostility or disinterest, they were good people. If he had been their child from the moment of his birth, he likely would have grown up idolizing them.

But that was only a what-if. He couldn't change himself now, nor did he want to. He had stopped believing in moral righteousness a long, long time ago.

As soon as he entered his bedroom, he pulled the pocket watch from his book bag and returned it to its protective case. The violets on the cover sparkled at him beneath the glass, pristine in their beauty. He had spent an eternity searching for a tough, durable case that matched the pocket watch in aesthetic; ultimately, he never found one, so instead he had one custom-made from scratch with several minor tweaks.

Once he had changed into his loungewear, he laid his uniform over the back of the sofa, knowing someone would come by to collect it sooner or later. He had instructed the help to keep their cleaning to an absolute minimum—only laundry and garbage. He was a private person by nature. Fortunately, the people in his life were only too happy to oblige. No one wanted to get involved with the king's bastard son, not even his own servants. Only his parents went out of their way to visit

him in his bedroom.

He sat down in the chair by the window and put one foot up. As he rested his chin on his knee, his gaze wandered to the photo frame on the sill. What it held was no singular memory but a collection of small things—old pressed flowers, small scraps of paper, a friendship bracelet that had fallen apart. Slowly, he lifted it up, tracing a finger over the flowers beneath the cold glass. These faded blossoms evoked his old memories with the clarity of a crisp snapshot.

The day he and Violette first encountered them, neither could name the pretty little blooms. Unlike weeds, however, they were permitted to thrive in a big cluster all to themselves. Later, when they went to the library, they learned that the flowers were known as forget-me-nots.

Together, they made a list of all the books they wanted to read, checking off each entry as they went. And since they preferred encyclopedias and history books, that was where they learned the tradition of the friendship bracelet: *wear it until it falls off and your wish will come true.*

He could remember every last word she said, the look on her face, the weather, the breeze, the sights, the smells. And now he had finally come this far... His forehead thumped against his knee. When he was younger, he would always cling to every last scrap of happiness. He had no idea that the moment Violette's smile turned away, reality would come crashing down around him.

Back then, he wasn't greedy; he always told himself it was enough to spend time with her. He sincerely believed, without any proof whatsoever, that love would keep them together. It was the innocence of a child, somehow intact despite everything life had put him through. By the time he realized that there was no *forever*, that momentum required force to be maintained, the countdown had already started... and that was when he learned just how powerless he truly was. He always claimed he would do anything to make her happy, but those thoughts meant nothing without the action to back them up.

I've only finished the preliminary arrangements. I'm nowhere near done yet, he cautioned himself, smacking his forehead against his knee again and again in an attempt to keep himself on track. It was too early to let his guard down. One wrong move and everything he had put into place would go down the drain.

Exhaling a lungful of air, he closed his eyes. In his mind, he could see Violette smiling bashfully, extending a hand. She was always the one who reached out first, who kept him on his feet, who kept him coming back to her... While Yulan could undoubtedly be described as an egotist, he was in no way self-possessed. Every inch of him, flesh and blood and bone, life and soul, belonged to Violette.

All the more reason to keep her as a caged bird, safely protected behind bars, ignorant of malice, carried by hand to anywhere she wanted to go. If she wanted to fly, he would build a bigger cage—just as long as she promised to take shelter in his shadow. Because if he lost his mistress...if his goddess were to breathe her last...he would surely go insane. After all, it had happened once already.

I can do this. I'll make it happen. I swear I won't make the same mistake again.

He bit his lip until he tasted a hint of blood. He could feel his palms throbbing with heat, knew his fingernails had broken the skin, but the pain didn't even register. It was nothing compared to the pain that he felt the day his world was destroyed by despair.

Chapter 106: Sunken Memories

WHY WAS IT that bad memories were so often stronger, clearer, and embedded more deeply than any of the good ones? Mistakes and regrets were like stains no amount of scrubbing could remove—and sometimes, those stains could spread.

If only he could simply learn from the past and move on. But some memories refused to be forgotten. Memories of a past that was once his future. Memories only he still possessed. Memories of hatred and fury and violence, of destruction, of the thirst to kill even a god. And on the day time rewound itself, Yulan vowed never to make the same mistake again.

“Violette Rem Vahan has been arrested.”

It didn’t come as shocking news. If anything, it was a possibility Yulan had tried not to think about.

“To think she would try to kill a family member, even if they *are* only half-related...”

“I’m told she was jealous of the girl’s engagement to Prince Claudia.”

“How disgraceful...”

“Sickening!”

“Horrifying...”

“She should have known our wise prince would never make the mistake of choosing a girl like her.”

Try as he might to plug his ears, Yulan heard their scorn and derision everywhere he went. All of them took turns insulting the vile criminal while praising the noble victim who defended her own homicidal sister. It didn’t help that said victim was presently betrothed to the crown prince. The whole country was celebrating the future

couple while castigating Violette in the same breath.

Disgraceful, sickening, horrifying. The ignorant masses smiled at each other as they brandished their moral righteousness in public like a cudgel. To them, the evil had been defeated and the world was now at peace. How he wished he could crush them all.

Violette had been imprisoned for the attempted murder of her half sister, and Yulan didn't find out until a day later.

At first, he thought he was having a bad dream—that his brain was tormenting him with his worst fears. When he awoke, his beloved would surely be there to call his name. The world revolved around her; no one would think to hurt her. Yes, he must have wished a thousand times for this idyllic fantasy to come true.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” said the policeman as he bowed deeply. But Yulan didn't even look at him. Instead, he slowly retraced his steps back home.

His posture was straight, but he hung his head. His vacant eyes barely saw a thing through his increasingly untidy bangs. His expression was only ever blank now. If by some chance he felt an emotion, no one would notice.

On the day Violette was arrested, “Yulan Cugurs” ceased to exist. His affable energy, his cute smile, his attentiveness—all of it vanished without a trace. With the misery that hung over him, the lifeless expression on his face, and the silence that followed whenever anyone spoke to him, he more greatly resembled his younger self who once suffered the violence of the majority. Without Violette, he would have lived his entire life this way.

He could no longer recall the number of days that had passed. He couldn't tell the difference between sleeping and passing out—or night and day, for that matter. Be it sun or moon that illuminated the sky, Yulan's hell never ceased. He only became cognizant of the time of day whenever he was actively working to rescue Violette, be it through petition or private meeting. After all, government buildings were only open during certain hours.

She was still alive. He could still save her. That thought was the only thing keeping him from death.

“Yulan.”

Someone called his name, and he raised his head a fraction. Without even looking at his face, he could tell who it was; the gaudy getup was his first clue, the smaller stature of the figure standing at his side, the second. Only then did his eyes, empty like the orbs of a skull, finally register emotion. Through his sharpened vision, he saw the prince and future princess regarding him gravely, as if to suggest they were *concerned*.

“I heard they called you in again...and that you didn’t say a word,” said Claudia.

At this carefully worded remark, Yulan remembered his summons but didn’t think much of it. *Yeah, that happened*. Either way, it wouldn’t have stopped him from coming here. He didn’t waste a single thought on anything but his own objective.

“Why won’t you just talk to them? They’re only interrogating you as a formality,” Claudia continued. “They don’t seriously believe you were in leagues with that—erm, with Violette.”

Violette was caught red-handed; when Maryjune screamed, a servant came running in and pinned Violette to the floor. It was quite clearly a crime of passion with no premeditation or accomplices involved, so the police officers were essentially going through the motions, crossing off every potential connection on the list. They didn’t care what was said during these interrogations. If they did, then Marin’s tearful testimony about the state of the Vahan household wouldn’t have been quietly covered up.

Thus, by positioning himself as the one close friend who refused to talk, he looked like a potential accomplice...or so he hoped. He wanted to delay her sentence as much as possible to buy time until he could save her. He was fully aware this half-baked ploy wouldn’t last long; like Claudia said, they didn’t actually suspect him. So really, he was wasting their time for the hell of it. Idiots who saw Violette as evil didn’t *deserve* to know the truth.

“We’ve heard your pleas, and Maryjune is mostly in favor, but...” Claudia trailed off.

“Yulan, I want to help her too,” Maryjune chimed in. “I know how you feel—I really, really do. We all want to do everything we can for the ones we love. At the same time, I don’t think we should turn a blind eye to her wrongdoing.”

“I know just how deeply you admired her, Yulan, but I must insist...she’s a criminal.”

“We want her to face her crime and atone for it. Don’t you think maybe it’s what she needs?”

To Yulan, this was the most damnably sickening thing in all the world. Their lips, their words, their eyes, their thoughts—the fact that they were *worried for him* made him want to puke. Their lofty position made them think they could see it all, and their kindness was condescending. It made his skin crawl. *Disgusting.*

He could hear his heart shattering as they stomped all over it. All his anger, bitterness, resentment, and pain leaked out of the hole in his chest, leaving him with a surprisingly clear mind. All was calm and still—save for the unending torrent of pure, unadulterated *hatred*. The valve was broken; the flow could not be stemmed.

In a perfect world, perfect people led perfect little lives. Anyone who *wasn’t* perfect would be relegated to the background while the main characters carried on blithely, never realizing their happiness was built on the corpses of those they used as stepping stones. One was the crown prince, and the other grew up loved and unabused, all because the right woman gave birth to them. They never stopped to consider who paid the price for their privilege. And if these *perfect people* didn’t even bother to look over their shoulder, then surely they only had themselves to blame when someone they trampled rose up and attacked them from behind.

No crime goes unpunished, they loved to say. But of course, they never even asked what that reason might *be*. All they cared about was the sound of their own voices as they recited the conventional wisdom. They didn’t want to have to think critically; no, what they *wanted* was to give themselves a pat on the back for briefly acknowledging criminals as human beings, then send them off to jail all the same.

Now they, with their naive idealism, had the nerve to pity him, to *admonish* him? Worthless. They were, in essence, throwing rocks at the weak from the safety of their tall tower, all the while too blissfully ignorant to comprehend their own actions. Ah, how he wished he could wring their scrawny necks right here and now...

“Never speak to me again.”

Like a tree rustling in the wind, Yulan tilted his head, and his

murky gold gaze pierced the two royals from beneath a curtain of auburn hair. His voice was emotionless and flat, like the automated response of a machine, but his eyes were another story. Those carried both chilling ice and searing heat—the murderous designs of a predator ready to rip their throats out with his teeth. That sacred golden hue was molten in its viscosity.

His unspoken threat was crystal clear: the moment they tried to call for help—the moment they so much as drew the breath required—their lives were forfeit.

Then, once they were frozen in shock, fear, or some combination thereof, Yulan simply walked past them, leaving his emotions behind and reverting to a husk. His mind had already wiped away any trace of the happy couple and their useless comments. This was the only way he could function anymore.

Instead, he envisioned his beloved Violette, trying her best to escape her pain and find happiness, gleefully convinced that it was finally within reach. Every now and then—beneath all the melodramatic gestures, the feigned high-pitched voice, and other bids for attention—he'd catch a glimpse of her sweet, loving smile. He wanted to see her again, if only for a few fleeting seconds.

God, I miss you so much.

Chapter 107: Stained Black

NEVER BEFORE HAD YULAN lamented the powerlessness of children so greatly. No matter how much knowledge he acquired, his biological age prevented anyone from taking him seriously. Again and again, he found himself exasperated with the sheer number of people who believed the length of one's life to be an accurate measurement of experience. To them, he was "too young" to possibly understand suffering.

Frankly, if they wanted to imagine children as a monolith of innocence, that was their business. But he *despised* this archaic system. Children were "gifts from God" yet somehow unworthy of basic respect—especially those who would come of age in just a few short years. For whatever reason, adults couldn't bear to acknowledge teenage intellect.

"Another waste of time..."

He shredded his rejected petition into ribbons and watched it pile up in the wastebasket. How many had met this fate? Including the ones he'd shoved into a drawer, there were likely far more than he could count on his fingers and toes. Each time they returned his petition, he would search for a different avenue, only to realize how many were restricted because of his age. Of his many connections, not a single one would agree to take his side.

Need to draft up the next one, he thought, pushing the failed entreaties from his mind. Deep down, he knew this one would fail too. Still, if he lost momentum for even a single second, he would hit rock bottom and stay there. Reality would crush him the same way it crushed countless other helpless children in this country.

But there was more than just his fate on the line. Without his protests, Violette would be taken out of her holding cell and sentenced in no time at all. Likewise, Marin's pleading would fall on deaf ears. After all, who would put stock in the word of a disgraced former maidservant? To them, she was an insect.

And so Yulan sat hunched over at his desk, surrounded by wads of discarded paper, writing by moonlight like a man possessed. No one

came to his bedroom anymore—not the servants, not even his own parents. They knew he would never listen, no matter what they said, even if they screamed at him—he would keep on writing, his bloodshot eyes never leaving the paper. These days, the only thing anyone felt toward him was fear. But that wasn't his problem.

Alone, he thought of Violette and wrote. She was in a place far darker and dirtier than this bedroom, and the thought made him seethe with rage. She belonged in a space unsullied by filth, bright and airy, enjoying tea and sweets, wearing a soft, plain dress, smiling and enjoying the breeze. But no, instead they had her in a jail cell with no windows, given barely enough food to survive, trapped against her will

“Gghh!”

His long, untrimmed fingernails gouged the paper—not enough to tear it, granted, but the deep wrinkles had rendered it unreadable. He couldn't even withstand his own idle thoughts. Nauseated, he pressed a hand to his mouth, the skin there stained black from smeared ink. It sickened him that the world would condemn her to such a place, that they would try to justify it by claiming she needed to atone, that they would think themselves *merciful*. But what he found most sickening of all, worse than maggots on a corpse, was the fact that he was powerless to save her.

He bit his lip until it was wet with dark, murky blood.

Chapter 108: Despair Has No Voice

WHAT WAS IT that made people seek a higher power or offer prayers to an idol made in their own image? What was it that inspired them to wish on shooting stars? Why did they think kneeling and bowing and making the sign of the cross would change anything?

Duralia was home to a number of churches, the oldest of which was a great cathedral first erected back when the nation was founded. Some were large enough to double as an orphanage, while others were scarcely bigger than a single-family home. The church that raised Marin was in the latter category.

Religious zealots were few and far between, but seemingly everyone believed in God as a matter of course. In Duralian culture, the act of crossing oneself was a prayer, and children who misbehaved were often warned that “God is always watching you.” He was up there, smiling down on them, and nary a soul suspected otherwise.

Bronze candelabras, sparkling stained glass windows, statues of the benevolent Holy Mother. Though this church was beautifully furnished as a place of worship, its close proximity to the great cathedral resulted in very little foot traffic. It didn’t help that the churchyard itself was enshrouded in dark woodland; it looked more like a place of penitence than a home for God’s light.

The thin layer of dust was proof enough that few worshippers ever came here. Evidently there weren’t many priests or nuns, either, because of all the times Yulan had visited this place, he’d never encountered a single person. Unless they were all simply avoiding him, of course.

How many times had he come here? Certainly not more than ten. It felt like an eternity had passed since his first visit, but at the same time, it could have been yesterday.

God...

Despite the depression clouding his vision, he could see the beauty of the stained-glass windows, carefully crafted to sparkle in the light. As sunshine streamed through each brightly colored fragment, the

embodiment of love and goodness smiled gracefully therein, as if all the world were at peace... Every time he came here, he regretted it and vowed never to return.

And yet, something kept him coming back.

Lacing his fingers together, he knelt before the Holy Mother. Beneath the long curtain of auburn hair, behind his firmly closed eyes, deep in his mind, he repeated the words over and over:

God, if you truly are omnipotent...if you are who people turn to for salvation...if you are the shepherd who exists to guide all mankind...if you are truly a "Heavenly Father" worthy of respect and not blasphemy...then save my world. Save my goddess.

He clasped his hands so tightly, his fingernails turned white, digging into his skin. The backs of his hands were peppered with scabbed scratch marks from all the times before. His chapped lips and dull eyes were dry from lack of nutrition. He was falling apart physically as well as mentally.

Yulan never believed in prayers or wishes—things with no proof of efficacy. Not once had he allowed himself to believe that maybe his good deeds would be rewarded. But...there was simply nothing else he could do. No matter how deep and intense his love, it was insanity to think he could take on the entire country and win. He wasn't even *trying* to win. He no longer had the mental capacity.

All he wanted was to save Violette, and thus he would clutch at anything within reach. As a nobleman with royal blood, surely he stood more of a chance than a single maidservant, right?

Wrong. His pleas were swatted away, as if he were little more than a buzzing housefly. None of it mattered—not the petitions, not the testimony, not even his interference with the trial. Slowly but surely, this country was throttling the life out of him. As long as he continued to defend Violette, they would keep twisting and twisting until he came to his senses...or they successfully strangled him to death, whichever came first.

He always believed he was born to serve her; he lived for her, and one day he'd die for her. As long as he could stand within her orbit and bear witness to her smile, he told himself that was purpose enough. That was why he wanted to help her—to do whatever it took to save her. He wanted her to be happy, even if it cost him his life, and he had

devoted himself entirely to that end.

Hah. And now look at where it got me.

Trembling, he shrank into himself, curling into a ball before the Holy Mother, clinging to a god he didn't even believe in. His friendly, well-mannered persona was gone, leaving behind only a pathetic worm with his forehead pressed to the floor. How laughably wretched. In the end, he never accomplished a damn thing.

They could laugh all they wanted. Hell, they could hurl stones and insults at him—even *he* found his powerlessness contemptible. They could punch him and kick him and spit in his face. But in return...

Just, please... Angel or devil, I don't care... Someone, please save her!

"Lord Yulan!"

Without warning, the door flew open, and a breathless voice called his name. He whipped his head up and whirled around to find a woman leaning against the door for support. Their eyes met.

Only one person knew he would be here—not his heartless so-called friends, not the parents who raised him, not his despicable half sibling, but *her*. Someone he only knew through Violette, but it was precisely that mutual interest that made her trustworthy.

Marin had lost a lot of weight since the days she served her mistress; her haggard appearance was not unlike his own. Her black unisex clothes had no real form to them, like a child's drawing brought to life. Without her maid's uniform or the Sunday clothes Violette had chosen for her, she was a shadow of her once-dignified self.

Sunshine gold met sunset red as Yulan shot her an inquiring look. But before he could speak, Marin's expression twisted in misery, and without a word, without so much as a sob, she crumpled to her knees, staring limply at the floor. In perfect silence, devoid of lamentation, the two of them sat on God's lap...and that was the moment he knew.

Their sweet, beloved Violette had changed both of their fates, but they had failed to change hers.

Chapter 109: After the Collapse

YULAN ALWAYS THOUGHT “can’t” was an excuse—that people only ever said it because they were too lazy to try. As long as the path was clear, the right choice was simply to keep marching; if that didn’t work, it was only because they gave up too fast. But Yulan had never been stuck in one place before. He never paused to consider the significance of each individual step. And as he would soon learn, sticking to the path didn’t always lead to results.

According to Marin, Violette’s fate was originally the death penalty, but it had been reduced to a life sentence in prison—all thanks to her half sister. Everyone praised Maryjune for her saintly kindness and compassion. *With her as our future queen, this country is in good hands*, they said. They all seemed to forget that Violette even existed.

“I want to kill them,” Marin whispered, her scarlet eyes pink and puffy from crying.

To Yulan, it was like looking at a mirror reflection of himself. He understood exactly how she felt. He wanted to kill each and every person who punished Violette, called her evil, even the ones who merely forgot about her. He would never let them live happy lives. They deserved to suffer as Violette presently suffered—no, they deserved an even worse fate. No amount of despair would be too much for them.

After the attempted murder, Marin was labeled a potential accomplice, just like Yulan. Lacking his privilege, however, she had likely been subjected to a far more grueling interrogation. Regardless, as she continued to defend her mistress, the world’s view of her grew more and more callous...until the moment the case was officially recorded as an unplanned crime of passion, at which point they dropped her like a hot potato. Naturally, she was thrown out of the Vahan estate.

After that, Marin teamed up with Yulan to campaign for Violette’s release. Together, they demanded that this trial be given the same considerations as any other, as prescribed by Duralian law. After all, if no one was going to examine what incited the incident, then they

weren't truly investigating the crime at all, were they? As expected, these protests fell on deaf ears.

He didn't know how much time had passed since Violette's sentence was finalized. With all the exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and the loss of his goddess, he was an empty shell with no capacity for thought or reasoning. Over and over he protested, *begged*, but it never changed a thing. Never again would he see her or hear her voice. Never again would she speak to him or call his name. Never again would she smile in his direction. He was cut off from her...forever.

Without her, he was sure he would die, no exaggeration. If she ceased to be a part of his life, his world would collapse, and his heart would spontaneously stop beating. There was no proof of this, of course, yet he had believed it all the same. So why was he still alive? Why was blood still pumping in his veins?

The next thing he knew, he was standing at the altar of the great cathedral.

To this day, he still didn't know why he chose that particular place at that point in time. He had no sentimental attachment to it, nor had he found God, nor was he planning to throw his life away and become a priest. He would have no answer to the question, were it asked. He simply needed a place to vent his anger and resentment and hatred...and he figured he may as well aim for the top.

The building was so stately and sacrosanct, the air itself seemed divine by association. The Holy Mother was depicted in a large stained-glass window, flanked by bronze statues of angels; even the little flames perched upon each candlestick appeared to sparkle. Was it the sheer solemnity that made it feel so much colder inside?

Looking up and around, every carefully chosen detail symbolized happiness, love, and philanthropy. This, the cathedral seemed to say, was the birthplace of justice and order. *Love thy neighbor*, as the saying went—was it an angel who said it first or the smiling Holy Mother herself? Yes, everyone praised the magnanimous worldview of some woman they'd never met. That was why they deemed her a god, and accordingly, any blasphemy toward her was a grave sin. Rejection of her was a rejection of the world itself.

Well then, by blaspheming against MY god, shouldn't you all be punished too?

Before he knew what he was doing, he grabbed the first thing he saw—the candelabra. It was so heavy, he ordinarily would have needed two hands just to lift it, yet somehow he found the strength to hurl it one-handed at the glass in front of him. He could vaguely feel his bones and nerve endings screaming in protest, but he didn't care. Laden with all his frustrations, the metal object traced a lazy arc through the air and plunged into the Holy Mother's chest.

Unable to endure the heavy impact, the stained glass loudly shattered. To him, the sound of destruction always resembled an ear-piercing howl of pain and misery, sharp enough to cut to the core. With this lethal weapon, he had murdered the saint who protected Duralia.

Anyone who refused to rescue Violette deserved death. Any faith that wouldn't show mercy to her deserved to be snuffed out. This world had rejected Violette, and he wanted no part of it. It all deserved to fall apart.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

They must have heard the noise and come running; he heard footsteps and exclamations of horror. Then someone pried his hand off the second candelabra and promptly pinned him to the floor.

He didn't protest when they twisted his arm, nor did he struggle with the weight on his back, nor did he speak when they pressed his face to the floor. He knew full well why his vision remained blurry and unfocused. When was the last time he slept? Or the last time he ate something? It was so long ago, he couldn't even remember. No surprise, then, that physical exertion would wipe him out immediately. Frankly, it was a miracle he managed to lift the candelabra at all.

Why?

Despite the burning rage that filled him, his despicable brain rapidly cooled off. He was no better than an animal acting on instinctual rage. All the more frustrating, then, that regret consumed him as easily as—and in equal measure to—his ire.

Why did I...fail?

His unrequited love was a minor footnote at most. As long as Violette got who she wanted, he wouldn't have asked for anything more. Even if it was the one person he despised most of all, he wouldn't have minded. As long as *someone* would make her smile, anyone would do. Yes, he chose to play the part of the understanding little brother,

delegating her future to a guy he didn't even *trust*...and this was the result.

He hunched his neck, and as he pressed his forehead against the hard floor, it stole away every last ounce of body heat. He gritted his teeth to brace against his stinging nose, but it didn't have the desired effect. With nowhere else to go, his emotions streamed out from behind his eyes.

“Aah...”

The drops formed rivulets that ran down his cheeks, wetting his hair and forming several tiny stains on the floor. His throat tightened like a hand was around it; his mouth was dry and tasted of copper.

What am I even doing anymore...?

His memories churned in circles, sorted in order of biggest regret. He could remember several points in time...turning points, you could call them. The place where it all started. Or the day Violette started to lose her identity. Or the ultimate final blow that shattered her heart for good.

If only...

If only he could go back.

It was an impossible daydream—the kind of desperate wish even a child would know better than to hope for. No amount of begging would ever change the past; it was the immutable foundation upon which the future was built. Otherwise, his life wouldn't have turned out this way to begin with. Therefore, he was destined to meet a similar end.

After they took his god, his soul, his love and faith, all he had left was his heart, traitorously beating against his will. Eventually, that too would cease to be.

But it doesn't matter anymore.

He didn't care if he lived or died. His world—his everything—was already destroyed. There was nothing left worth thinking about. And yet...somehow, after everything that had happened, his heart wandered back to the same old worn-out desire.

If I could go back and do it all again...

Through his hazy vision, he looked up at the shattered stained glass. The pointed shards glinted sharply in the light, shining far

brighter than the dim glow of a halo. He glared up at the religious symbol, tear-strewn face and all, his wet eyes the color of dulled blades. He had far surpassed his physical limits, but until the moment his body gave out completely, he would keep thinking the same thing:

If I could go back in time, I'd never let anyone else have her—not Claudia, not even God. I'd never entrust them with her future happiness. Least of all someone I know I can't trust.

If anyone could truly make Violette happy, it was none other than Yulan himself.

Chapter 110: Forgive Me My Arrogance

WHEN YULAN NEXT opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was his own knee. The room was so dark that, for a moment, he didn't realize he'd opened his eyes at all. There was no light source anywhere that he could see. He must have dozed off in the middle of his train of thought.

"Not again..."

He'd had this same dream countless times—so often that it was rare for him to dream of anything else. Nearly every night, he'd dream of the past that no longer was.

"Ugh, my neck hurts."

His muscles were stiff and sore from sleeping in a weird position. Pressing a hand to his neck, he stretched it from side to side, which helped a little—at least, he thought it did. But in reality, it didn't solve the underlying issue.

By his calculations, it was late at night. As far as he could see from his window, it was pitch-dark outside, with no lights on in any of the other rooms. The whole house had gone quiet, meaning both his parents and the servants were likely sound asleep. What a strange time for him to be awake. It reminded him of the last timeline—but that was possibly just a side effect of the dream. After all, he no longer needed to stay up all night without eating.

That timeline was, quite literally, a nightmare. How he wished it could be dismissed as such—but alas, those were memories he had revisited, not figments of his imagination. All of it happened, and then it was erased, but he would never forget. *Feels like an eternity ago*, he mused to himself. But in actuality, less than a year had elapsed since the day time rewound itself—like a dream within a dream.

The day he gave up and smashed the Holy Mother at the great cathedral, he told himself he didn't care if he died, because he couldn't keep living in that world. Once he lost the one person he would have sacrificed the entire country to protect, his life would end one of two ways: starvation or capital punishment. He didn't care which.

But the next time he opened his eyes, he saw a familiar ceiling, and then he saw the calendar had reset to a year prior. At first, he was *certain* his mind was broken beyond repair. Indeed, if he was still possessed of his sanity, he would have taken action with caution and deep suspicion of everyone around him.

Was this a dream? Or was *that* a nightmare? Or...had a brand-new hell just begun? Now that he no longer dared to place hope in reality or dreams, the possibility that he'd gone back in time was nonexistent.

But that was fine by him.

Be it dream, illusion, or purgatory, he didn't care. It didn't matter where he was or what had happened to him. All he wanted was to see Violette, just Violette, and he didn't stop running until he found her.

"Yulan, you're being loud. You'll startle everyone," she had said to him with a perplexed smile on her face. This was the very voice he had so wanted to hear—the face he had yearned to see. It was Violette, alive and in the light. He could reach out and touch her; if he called her name, she would answer with his own.

He was so happy, he could cry—in fact, he could *die*. Nothing in the world could possibly fill him with more joy than this very moment. Nothing else mattered. He didn't need anyone or anything that might take this away from him.

In his mind, something clicked. Shattered fragments regained their form, and something new filled the empty slot.

After that, he moved rather quickly. Whenever he looked back, he often cursed his lack of foresight, but for the most part, things had gone according to plan. It was a shame he had to make Violette wait, but right now, caution was his highest priority. As long as nothing veered off-track, he would be able to create the future he desired. And since he couldn't afford to let his guard down or grow complacent, he had taken the worst-case scenario into consideration as well.

Never did learn more about this, though, he mused as his eyes wandered to the paperwork that would soon be disposed of. In addition to a list of everything he knew about Violette, he had prepared a document with all the information he could find regarding his supernatural experience.

He had no interest in going back to his original timeline, and ideally he didn't want to have to repeat this one, either. He had no

interest in logical explanations. Whether it was a divine miracle or a demonic contract, he didn't care. All he needed was proof that this wasn't a dream. That was the only reason he thought to investigate. Ultimately, however, he ran out of leads before he learned a damn thing.

Not much longer now. Soon it'll all be set in stone.

Once his eyes had adapted to the dark, he slowly approached his double-pedestal desk. What was once littered with waste paper in the darker timeline was now neat and tidy, with nary a speck of dust. Sitting in the center was a single pale envelope, glowing faintly in the dark, sealed with red wax that bore the family crest.

This letter was the culmination of all his hard work thus far, and it would win him his happy ending. It was an incredibly risky move, and if it failed, he would have practically zero recourse. But conversely, if it *succeeded*, Violette's future was secured. Yulan would single-handedly decide her fate.

"Vio..."

Just a little longer, okay? I swear I won't screw it up this time. I know it's arrogant to tie you down, but I hope you can forgive me. I'm going to put my life on the line to make you happy.

Chapter 111: Diamond in the Rough

HAVING SOLVED THE AWKWARDNESS with Claudia *and* the friction with Yulan, Violette was feeling better than she had in a long time. On reflection, perhaps it was the best she'd felt in all her life. Never before had she tasted freedom from such a heavy burden. Perhaps her perceptions were warped from all the baggage placed on her since birth.

To anyone else, it must have seemed like a minor, trivial thing. But to Violette, it was crucially important.

"Welcome home, my lady."

"Thank you. Am I late?"

When she returned home, she gauged Marin's reaction. While it wasn't uncommon for her to make a late appearance after school, her schedule was so regimented that *any* deviation became cause for concern. She always made sure to arrive in time for dinner so no one else would be inconvenienced, but in this house, she would get scolded whether she called home or not.

"Not at all. Shall we make ready?" Marin asked.

"Good question. There's not much time until supper, is there?" Violette replied.

"Plenty of time to get dressed but not enough to relax, I would say."

"In that case, we'd best start right away. If I sit down, I won't want to get up again."

"Yes, my lady."

As soon as she entered her bedroom, she changed into more comfortable clothes and started making herself presentable. All she needed to do was brush her windswept hair, but she didn't dare skip it, lest her father chastise her at the dining table. She didn't much enjoy looking in the mirror, even so. The discomfort with her reflection was a feeling instilled in her since the time her mother was alive, and it only intensified once her developing body started to attract lecherous stares. For someone who despised her own appearance, looking in the mirror

was tantamount to self-harm.

These days, however, she caught herself checking her reflection more often. The foundation of her outlook hadn't changed, but for better or for worse, she now perceived her looks in a different light.

"Ouch..."

The brush hit a snag near the tips of her hair, tugging slightly against her scalp. Looking down, she realized a small knot had formed—a regular occurrence, impossible to avoid due to the texture of her hair. When she was younger, her hair was straight and silky, but now her strands fell in loose waves. Was it a result of aging, or was it because she had grown her hair out? Either way, she wasn't going back to short straight hair anytime soon.

"My hair's grown quite long, hasn't it?"

"Indeed, it hasn't been cut since you started growing it out, save for trimming off split ends."

"How long has it been? Five years, or perhaps six?"

"Good question. It would have started at some point after I became your maid."

"Either way, it's been ages."

In the past, her hair was never permitted to grow past her shoulders. While the other young ladies were free to show off their stylish coiffures, Violette would turn up at social gatherings with a fresh haircut and nothing more. The memory was so far beyond embarrassing that it was downright exasperating. Granted, back then there were surely more pressing matters to attend to, but still—what was Auld *thinking*, letting the public see her like that?

The answer, of course, was that her father didn't care. If anything, she suspected she was lucky he prepared a dress for her at all.

"Speaking of split ends, it appears I've got more to trim... Ugh, my hair is so *dry*..."

It looked glossy at a glance, but the slightest touch made the lack of moisture painfully apparent. Not as dry as straw, of course, but in desperate need of improvement. There were some things Marin simply couldn't catch without Violette caring enough to pay attention.

Not only were there dry patches, but upon closer inspection, she

could see short, frizzy strands poking up. Luckily, it wasn't the sort of thing one could spot at a distance, so she doubted most people had noticed. But then she remembered: there *was* someone in short range recently. Point-blank range. And that someone had touched her hair! In an instant, her usually pale complexion flushed pink.

"What is it, Lady Violette?"

These were things she never thought about, and they came packaged with feelings she'd never before experienced. Overcome with intense embarrassment, she pulled her hair over her face, as if to hide from it. Then she felt a gentle hand at her back...but Marin surely hadn't an inkling of what it was that had flustered her.

Ugh, Yulan must have noticed!

This epiphany had reached her far, *far* too late to be of any use. Regardless, the fact that Yulan had witnessed her shabby hair weighed heavily on her. She wasn't sad or depressed—just boiling with pure, unfiltered shame.

She knew he wasn't the type to care about looks, and in light of all the other ways she'd humiliated herself in front of him, surely a single bad hair day was nothing in comparison. Nevertheless, infatuation worked in mysterious ways. While she wanted so badly for him to accept all her myriad faults, she simultaneously tried to erase as many imperfections as possible. Through the lens of love, things she would normally forgive—and often, things she never would have noticed otherwise—were suddenly glaring flaws with the power to ruin his image of her utterly.

"Marin, I have a favor to ask."

"Yes? How can I be of service?"

"Starting today, could you give me special hair treatments?"

Normally Violette asked for things with firm eye contact, but this time her gaze was pointed down and away, her face buried in her own hair. Marin could see quite clearly that the girl was blushing, but if she dared comment on it, Violette would retract her question—and Marin was not the type to make light of a rare request from her mistress.

"Of course, my lady. It seems the time has come for my hand-picked hair products to prove their worth."

"You've been collecting hair products?"

“I’ve refrained from using them since you’re not generally proactive about such matters, but...it seems I no longer need to hold back.”

“Go easy on me, won’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I’ll be gentle. I promise, you’re going to love the results.”

“That’s not quite what I meant...”

Marin was overjoyed at the opportunity to make her mistress shine, especially since said mistress typically despised herself *and* her beauty. Trying to go above and beyond would, more often than not, only add a new burden to the pile. Thus, Marin had restrained herself over the years—endured Violette’s beauty never getting the recognition it deserved, and endured Violette’s refusal to put in any further effort.

Like a honed blade, her shine struck fear in the hearts of those around her. But this current Violette was a mere diamond in the rough. Her true beauty was far beyond what they could possibly imagine. And now that she had given her blessing, there was no longer anything stopping Marin from achieving it.

“I pledge to make you the most beautiful of all.”

“Thank you, Marin. That’s reassuring to hear.”

Marin was delighted by this change of heart, if a tiny bit sad that she hadn’t inspired it herself. Yes, she knew who this beauty was really for, but she decided she would play dumb...for now, at least.

Chapter 112: Wanting More

LONG, SOFT HAIR trailed in the breeze, as if the wind itself

were flaunting it. Its pale gray hue sparkled like silver in the sun, forming a halo of light. She was so beautiful, one might have envisioned wings sprouting from her back.

Truth be told, this was nothing new. From day one, Violette was possessed of the sort of beauty that God himself must have sculpted by hand. But today there was a notable difference—and all because she found someone she wanted to impress.

With Marin's assistance, Violette *sparkled*. Nothing about her had physically changed at all; rather, Marin had merely polished the surface of the gem that lay within her all along. But for a girl in love, sometimes that was all it took.

It smells so good...

As she breathed in the smell of her hair, she thought back to last night. Marin had brought in so many different hair oils, skincare products, and soaps, Violette could scarcely imagine where the woman stored it all. Together, they picked out an oil with a summery jasmine fragrance. Ever since then, the scent of fresh flowers had followed Violette around—not too strong but ever-present.



At breakfast, Maryjune had complimented her on it, only for her father to criticize her for “wearing perfume to the dining table,” promptly ruining her sunny mood. It wasn’t even perfume.

It’s so much silkier than it used to be...and my skin feels softer too!

Enjoying the novel sensation, Violette ran her fingers through her hair again and again, amazed at the lack of tangles. Her face was feeling a bit more moisturized as well. When she checked it in the mirror this morning, it still looked deathly pale, but the dark circles seemed to have faded a little.

By her own estimation, she had never purposely *neglected* her personal care, but she never realized just how much could change with a little dedicated effort. The change wasn’t dramatic by any means; in fact, it was possibly all in her head. But perhaps what mattered most was her own mindset.

“Vio?”

At the sound of her nickname, her heart skipped a beat.

“Morning! I don’t usually see you here on the first-years’ floor,” Yulan continued as he jogged straight over to her. His friendly smile was no different from usual, yet it made her nervous—likely due to the feelings that had sprouted in her chest. “Is something wrong? Need me to come with you to talk to someone?”

“Thank you for offering, but no, I’m...not here on any particular errand...”

Faltering, Violette awkwardly averted her gaze, and Yulan’s mind jumped straight to the worst-case scenario. Did something happen to her at home? The mere *concept* filled him with hate. Alas, the only emotion he could glean from her eyes was innocent anxiety. Her fingers wiggled restlessly as she stared off to the side, a frown on her unusually rosy face. Right now, she looked nothing like her usual aloof persona. She looked...*insecure*.

“I was just...hoping to see you, that’s all.”

Yulan’s round puppy-dog eyes grew even rounder, gleaming in the light, his golden irises reflecting Violette’s bashfulness back at her. Wanting to see her crush... Hers was a desire so pure, it could be called childish—like a toddler clamoring for a toy. But with the two of them climbing the staircase to adulthood, it was decidedly *not* a child’s desire.

Wishing. Hoping. Expecting someone else to do that which she could not. It felt like too much of a weight—like it might steal away her ability to act, or what precious little time she had. She couldn't enjoy the thrill of affection; she couldn't bring herself to accept the ulterior motives associated with infatuation. So why, then, did her feet carry her here nonetheless? Was it a lack of self-control? Or was her love simply too strong to be reined in? To Violette, it was both, yet neither, simultaneously.

She had inherited this inclination from her mother, and she was certainly not grateful for it. She was terrified of crossing a line into “nuisance” territory. What if her desires and actions caused trouble for someone? Or was this normal?

“That really means a lot,” Yulan replied, in a voice as soft and sweet as cotton candy.

Somehow, this touched her heart far more than his usual sunny disposition. Light but heavy, sugary and strong. It wasn't frail enough to melt in the warmth of her hand; if anything, it felt like it was sucking her in. *It was melting her.*

“I wanted to see you too, Vio. I always do.” He smiled happily, a blush on his cheeks. It was a boyish sort of expression, but on a young man's face.

She had known him since childhood; they had grown up together. She remembered when his height first outstripped her own, and when his high-pitched voice cracked and deepened. She was there for all of it, and yet...

Beneath his long lashes, she caught a glimpse of honey—overpoweringly sweet and rich. A single drop of that viscous liquid was surely far sweeter than any sugared treat.

“Well, I'd better head back. I wish you'd gotten here a little earlier,” he sighed.

“Oh...right,” she replied. “We should both head back before the bell rings.”

“What are you doing for lunch today? Made plans with anyone?”

“I did, actually. But after school I'm available, as always.”

“Okay then, I'll meet you at your classroom after school.”

As foot traffic in the hallway grew scarce, they waved goodbye.

He insisted on watching her go, so she walked off—but once she was safely around the corner and out of sight, she stopped and leaned one shoulder against the wall for support. If she stared at the floor, she could trick herself into thinking it was a world all her own.

Pressing her hands to her cheeks, she felt the moisture from Marin's flawless skincare regimen. She was enjoying it dearly just a few moments ago, but right now she was flummoxed by a fever she'd never before experienced. She felt no urge to cry, and yet her eyes burned; her temperature was spiking for no clear reason. If she looked in a mirror, she was liable to see a tomato looking back.

Violette had always thought of herself as a masculine person. Not because of her looks, personality, or the way she carried herself, but merely due to how she was raised. Bellerose had always treated her as a boy, and regardless of biology or how she identified, little could overwrite those experiences during her most formative of years. Thanks to Marin, she learned how the female body worked, and with puberty she was all but forced to accept that she was indeed a girl...but after growing up in that environment, the cognitive dissonance and lack of knowledge was impossible to deny.

Her identity as a "boy" was ingrained in her, and after having her true gender invalidated and erased all those years, it had caused some damage. Over the years, she continually asked herself: *Why do I have to be a girl? Why can't I be a boy? What's the difference between the real me and the "me" Mother wants me to be?*

But now those feelings were crumbling away.

They used to be so alike: small, soft, with similar muscles and voices and bone structure. He used to fit perfectly in her arms—just the right height to stroke his hair. He was small and weak, and she had felt compelled to protect him. But now he was bigger and stronger than her, with a deeper voice. He was too tall for her to stroke his hair, too big for her to hold him. She was only ever on the receiving end these days.

Yulan was no longer a boy—he was becoming a man. Surely she had known this for years now, hadn't she? *No, that's not it*, she realized. She had known he was male, but what she hadn't known was that she was *female*. That she loved him as a romantic partner.

"Ghhh...!"

Reflexively, she pressed both hands to her face and suppressed a

wordless scream in the back of her throat. If she started screeching at school, people would think she was certifiably insane, and Yulan would worry about her far more than necessary. But the impulse to crawl in a hole and die of shame was much too powerful for her rational mind to contend with.

Once she realized her feelings for him, she discovered desire, possessiveness, and the need to be with him. She wanted so much more... She wanted to...

No, stop! Wh-what kind of pervert am I?!

She wanted to touch him...and she wanted him to touch her.

Chapter 113: The Second Timeline

“I IS THE FOOD TO YOUR LIKING, Lady Vio?”

“Huh?”

“I notice you haven’t made much progress.”

“Oh... I’m sorry, I was lost in thought.”

At lunchtime, Violette and Rosette sat facing each other on the terrace, warmed by gentle rays of sunshine. By this point, they had acclimated to the stares of all those around them; if only the same could be said for their unwanted audience. Alas, the pairing of Violette and Rosette was still strange enough that people did double takes in passing. Luckily, the two of them were quite used to the attention.

Gracing the table was the lunch they had ordered not long ago. As usual, Violette’s was less of a “lunch” and more of a dessert, yet she’d barely touched any of it. Granted, she was a habitually slow eater without much of an appetite, but her plates were visibly full even by her own standards.

“Something on your mind?” Rosette asked.

“Not exactly... I suppose I’m just frustrated with a side of myself I didn’t know existed,” Violette replied.

She could practically see the question mark in Rosette’s expression. Unfortunately, no matter how deeply she trusted her present company, she didn’t dare admit aloud that she, a young lady of nobility, wanted a man to touch her. On campus, there was no telling who might be listening. And if anyone were to find out, rumors would fly out of control.

“I’m sorry I worried you,” Violette continued, “but really, I’m fine. Just a bit perplexed, that’s all.”

“Well, all right...but do let me know if I can help, won’t you?” said Rosette with a look of concern.

“Thank you,” Violette replied with a reassuring smile.

After that, she made an effort to focus on the meal in front of her.

She was indeed hungry, and once she put her confusion aside, her fork and lips moved with ease. The pasta was tossed in a lovely tomato sauce, and its tangy citrus notes kept her coming back for more.

“That reminds me, Lady Vio, have you already made preparations?”

“For what?”

“It’s *that time of year*, you know.”

“Oh...come to think of it, you’re right.”

At Tanzanite Academy, test season came around six times a year, and this would be the fourth. Thanks to Yulan, Violette had gained Claudia’s assistance for the past three; as a result, Auld complained ever so slightly less than he had in the original timeline, and Violette was able to shrug it off as background noise. Hard to say whether she had matured or simply given up. Either way, he wasn’t entitled to her pain any longer.

Time really flies, doesn’t it? If the fourth testing period was coming up, then they were officially two-thirds of the way through the school year.

On the day Violette first awoke in this second timeline, she felt only shock and defeat—in fact, there were times when life in prison seemed far more appealing than a repeat of that wretched year. Looking back, she was amazed to realize how much had changed. She had discovered so many new feelings, so many options she’d never considered, things she threw away, things she didn’t really need to begin with. But most significant of all was the regret she felt at the end of the first timeline...and now she had spent nearly a full year in the second.

“Would you care to study together? If you’d like, I’ll reserve a salon after school sometime,” Rosette offered.

“Oh, my, that sounds lovely. But I fear we may spend our time chatting instead,” Violette said.

“I’m afraid I can’t deny that...”

“Hee hee! Well, it sounds like a wonderful time.”

Where would the end of the year find her? Deep down, she hoped these peaceful days would last.

Chapter 114: The Visitor

YULAN HAD PUT in the effort and gotten the results. He believed that everything was heading in the right direction.

“Yulaaan! Whatcha doin’?” asked Gia.

“Organizing my schedule from now until test time,” Yulan answered.

“Is it really that complicated?”

“No, but depending on how I go about acquiring last year’s tests, it might take time.”

“Can’t you just get ’em from your princess?”

“For myself, yes. But where am I going to get the ones *she’ll* need?”

“Ah, right... Well, why not just ask the Prince like before?”

Yulan fixed him with a dead-eyed stare. Gia averted his eyes and grimaced.

“Sheesh... Sorry I asked.” Evidently he had stomped down hard on one of Yulan’s sore spots. He’d never felt the need to read between the lines, but he also had no interest in prodding a time bomb.

“It will be my last resort,” Yulan answered after a pause.

If what Violette said was true, then there was no longer any awkwardness between her and Claudia. Yulan need not insert himself at all; Violette could go ask him directly, or Claudia might even take it upon himself to assist her unprompted.

Really, there was no reason to devise this plan, save one: because Yulan selfishly didn’t want to let the two of them have any private time together. Hence he racked his brains over and over, searching for an alternate route. Ultimately, he had failed on all counts, and from Gia’s perspective, he was better off giving up.

If it was about anything else, surely Yulan would have been able to think more rationally, yet here he was, flailing in a futile show of resistance. His hatred of Claudia was truly a force to be reckoned with

—easily on par with his obsession with Violette.

But hey, I guess it could be worse...right?

One look at those golden eyes and Gia could easily infer the nature of the feud between Yulan and Claudia. Luckily, as Yulan's designated "best friend," certain meddlers often found their way to him to deliver information he never asked for. Thanks to them, his suspicions were all but confirmed. He still couldn't comprehend the seething hatred, but at the very least, he could understand its origins. He felt sorry for the prince and all the more frustrated with his friend.

Lately, however, Yulan's fury had faded...well, outwardly, at least. It was probably still knocking around in there somewhere. But his emotions were focused elsewhere at the moment; his eyes were narrowed, glaring at something only *he* could see. Alas, Yulan wasn't the type to vent about his problems, and Gia wasn't the type to pry. They may have seemed close to everyone else, but a massive gulf lay between their hearts.

Yulan shot a quick glance at Gia, who grinned innocently in return.

"Hey, Yulan?"

Neither of them got too involved or expected anything more than the minimum. They didn't read too deeply into anything, and as a result, they had established a firm foundation of trust and understanding. From the day they met, Gia knew this guy would prove to be the ultimate toy. Yulan would destroy that which Gia hated most: his boredom.

"Keep it entertaining, will ya?"

He didn't care about the rest. To him, it didn't matter who benefited, who got hurt, or how it all played out in the end—as long as it was interesting.

"I'm not your servant," Yulan retorted.

"Aw, I'd hire you if you asked me to!" Gia said with a guffaw.

He was every bit as twisted as Yulan, yet he was seemingly never in a bad mood—likely owing to his vastly different outlook on what it meant to live true to his heart. His free-spirited nature annoyed Yulan to no end.

"Anyway, you've got a visitor," Gia continued in spite of Yulan's

scowl.

One could question why Gia would delay mentioning such a thing, but equally questionable was this visitor's choice of messenger. Most students here wouldn't bother asking a Sinan like Gia to begin with; they were willing to accept him, but that didn't equate to trusting him with a message. Either this was an unusual visitor, or they had a reason to think Gia was the best person to ask.

Were it the latter, Yulan had a delightful idea of who it might be...but in that case, Gia wouldn't have described her as a mere visitor. Clueless, he looked over at the door. A small figure stood there, calmly waiting for Gia to uphold their arrangement, and when their eyes met, her face lit up with glee. She waved at him, her white hair swaying.

Evidently, it was the former.

Chapter 115: The Dilemma

YULAN FROWNED, then instantly smiled. Within three seconds, his mood had crashed to rock bottom, only to be swiftly concealed by his outward persona. An impressive feat. To Gia, this was hilarious; for Yulan, it was like finding a spider in his cereal.

Maryjune, meanwhile, wore an oblivious smile reminiscent of sunshine. Most would find it endearing, but sadly, Yulan was not among them. As for Gia, it didn't occur to him to care one way or the other.

Suppressing the urge to growl in frustration, Yulan forced himself to his feet while Gia waved lazily, as if to suggest his job was done. Yulan briefly considered dragging his dear friend into it, but he knew it would only make the situation more stressful.

"Did you...need something?" he asked calmly, careful not to let his disgust show on his face. As long as he wore a smile, this syrup-for-brains idiot would automatically assume he was in high spirits. Of course, this misunderstanding would only sour his mood further, but he didn't want to risk upsetting Maryjune and, consequently, her father.

Every now and then, he liked to daydream about how satisfying it would feel to crush this girl and her horrid parents all at once.

"Sorry for dropping by with no notice... I have a favor to ask," she explained. He despised the way she wore a hint of guilt in her smile yet pressed on regardless. She never stopped to consider that maybe, just maybe, he was tearing her limb from limb in his mind's eye.

Instead of answering, he maintained an expression that would be categorized as a smile, and she chose to interpret it as a nod to continue. Was it idiocy or sincerity that rendered her incapable of recognizing feigned politeness? Not that it mattered.

"You know how tests are coming up soon? Well, you always get really good grades, so I was wondering if we could study together."

"Excuse me?"

The real Yulan slipped out before he could stop himself, unfiltered suspicion and all. For a moment he panicked, but Maryjune was well

and truly clueless. She seemed to perceive it as innocent confusion.

“See, I get how the tests work now. I was *going* to ask my sister, but since you and I are in the same grade, I thought it’d be easier for the two of us to study together,” she continued, her angelic smile closing off all routes of escape. Did she have any idea how terrifying it was for her to mention her sister?

Judging from her remarks, she seemed to have concluded that Violette’s old tests would end up with Yulan. It was too late to overturn that decision; Violette would obviously give priority to the person with whom she had already made arrangements. This was Maryjune’s way of getting around that.

Ugh, what a hassle.

Right when he was finally within reach of his goal. Right when the prospects were starting to look bright. Right when he thought he’d have the chance to sleep in for a change.

He didn’t regret working tirelessly for the sake of Violette’s future happiness. No matter how many hours of sleep he lost, she was worthy of it. But that was Violette. No one else was worth such effort, Maryjune least of all.

He was loath to spend a single second of his time on her. Merely having this conversation made him miserable. And now she wanted to meet up regularly until test season was over? He would have sooner written a formal essay to decline. But...to do so was far too risky.

“Hmmm. I’ll think about it,” he told her.

In contrast to his dour mood, Maryjune skipped off happily. He’d been careful not to make any promises, but he knew he would likely end up stuck to this commitment. Sometimes a choice had no easy answer. Each time he encountered one, he lamented his powerlessness, settled for the option that caused the least harm, and endured the disgrace.

I’d better warn Vio, just in case. If Maryjune were to blab about it to her stupid father, Violette might get hurt.

Granted, they could always form a study group like last time, but Yulan didn’t want to force Violette to have to be around her sister for longer than was strictly necessary. Add in Claudia and Milania, and the “study group” would descend into sheer hell.

Pressing a hand to his throbbing head, he decided to reorganize his schedule yet again—this time to account for the worm who was gnawing her way into it.

Chapter 116: Imagination

THERE HAD BEEN a handful of times like this one, when Violette found herself yearning for school to end, but only now did she realize that Yulan was involved in every single one of those instances.

“Hey, Vio. Sorry I took so long,” he called.

After the majority of students had gone home, leaving the classroom nearly deserted, the boy in question turned up. In his presence, the doorframe seemed so much smaller than it did whenever she passed through it. These minor details reminded her over and over of their physical differences.

Grabbing her book bag, she walked over to where he stood, wearing his usual sunny smile. Their eyes met.

“Wanna go somewhere? I put in a reservation at a salon, just in case,” he explained.

“You did? I’m so sorry! I should have thought about it!” she replied.

“It was my idea, remember? Of course I’d handle it.”

“I still should have taken some initiative... Sorry. And thank you.”

“All I need’s the last part, silly.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem! So, what’ll it be? If you’re too tired to go anywhere, I already ordered tea and snacks at the salon.”

“Well then, we should enjoy them. Otherwise they’ll go to waste.”

Yulan nodded, satisfied with her response. He must have seen it coming. If she’d asked to go into town, he would have obliged, but somehow he had the uncanny ability to predict what she would want at any given time.

In truth, Yulan had reserved a salon because he wanted the opportunity to relax together. Plus, he needed to talk to her...and he didn’t want anyone overhearing and starting rumors.

"I hope you like what I ordered. I used my best judgment," he told her.

"You and Marin know my tastes better than anyone, so I'm not worried," she replied. "I care more about whether you made sure to order for yourself as well."

"Then you'll be relieved to hear that I did."

The salon featured glass walls and a glass ceiling—less like a room and more like a terrace. It was a bright and sunny place with a great view, while at the same time, the dark wood trim gave it a classy aesthetic. But because the garden outside was populated more heavily with trees than flowers, this was by no means a popular choice of salon. Luckily, Violette tended to prefer quiet, private spaces.

"Oh, it looks like they've already set the table for us."

A sugary scent filled the room. Atop the neatly dressed table was a tea set and all manner of cakes, safely protected under a glass dome. Violette wasn't sure whether this was done per Yulan's request or if the staff had predicted the timing of their arrival with laser precision, but either way, the people who worked here were clearly professionals.

"You take your tea with milk, right? Is it still too hot?" Yulan asked.

"It's wonderful, thank you. So what did you order for yourself? This chocolate?"

"Yeah. Supposedly, it has a really high percentage of cacao. Last time I tried it, it was really good."

He served Violette with a practiced hand. As a member of nobility, this was not seen as something to be proud of—a *proper* noble would summon the help to handle it. Accordingly, most of the students and faculty at Tanzanite would be hard-pressed to brew a fine cup of tea on their own.

That said, Yulan had only honed this skill out of an extreme distrust of others. Hard to say which was better. But of course, in his eyes, it was like one door had shut and another had opened. It was his pleasure to be of service to Violette.

"Oh, but that's just my own personal taste," he continued hastily. "I don't think you'd enjoy it."

Violette was the kind of girl who thought a café au lait was too

bitter, let alone black coffee, and these little squares were about the same shade as the latter. Still, as a dyed-in-the-wool sugar fanatic, she couldn't help but equate chocolate to sweetness in her mind. And if Yulan, of all people, was actually willing to eat chocolate for a change, then her curiosity was irresistibly piqued. On reflex, she snapped up the smallest piece.

"Hrrk...!"

"Vio?!"

"Wh-what is this?! Sludge?!"

It was even worse than the dark chocolate she had once eaten by mistake years ago. Unable to swallow it, she could feel it melting in her mouth and sliding to the back of her throat. Every time her tongue brushed against it, an unpleasant sensation ran down her back like a cold sweat. Though, she had no one to blame but herself, seeing as she was warned well in advance and reached for it regardless. *It seems I'll never be able to handle this flavor as long as I live.*

"Are you okay?! It's not normal dark chocolate—it's *extra* dark!" Yulan sputtered. "Let's see, uh... Here, drink this and cleanse your palate! Nice and sweet!"

"Mmgh... Thank you. That was...intense," she choked.

"It's 95 percent cacao or something, so I would think so! See, I like it because it doesn't have that sweet aftertaste like all the rest."

"Ugh, I can still taste it..."

"Sorry, I should have stopped you."

"It's not your fault; I should have known better. I was just so surprised that you were enjoying chocolate, of all things... Curiosity really killed the cat this time."

"You don't have to force yourself to eat stuff you don't like, you know."

"From now on, I assure you, I won't!"

It was a delightful treat for Yulan, perhaps, but to Violette it was like eating dirt. To think their palates were so drastically different... Luckily, they weren't obligated to eat each other's desserts.

"After eating that dreck, these snowballs taste like sheer heaven," she remarked.

"I'm rather enjoying my *dreck*, thank you very much," he replied, popping one of the nasty black lumps into his mouth. She knew full well what it tasted like, having just experienced it for herself—so how could he eat something so joyless with an unwavering smile on his face? Unthinkable!

"How utterly aggravating," she sighed.

"You said the same thing the last time you tried black coffee."

"Well, I can't help it. Bitter food is just...more classy, you know?"

"People *do* tend to see it that way..."

Why was it that enjoying sugar was childish, while enjoying its absence was mature? Why did so many prefer to read bittersweet, tragic love stories over syrupy-sweet romance? Why was it that a sad person finding happiness seemed more miraculous than a happy person finding *more* happiness? Was it an admirable sign of strength to persevere against misery rather than indulge in pleasure?

"I mean, everybody thinks the grass is greener on the other side, right? There are times when I wish I could eat sugary stuff, myself," Yulan commented.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Whenever I see you eating something with a big smile on your face, it makes me tempted to try it."

"Is that so? Let's see you put your money where your mouth is."

Violette reached for the snowball cookies, so named for the thick layer of powdered sugar that coated them. Since she liked them, Yulan was all but guaranteed to hate them. Grinning, she plucked one up between her fingers and held it aloft in the space between them. Normally she would never hand-feed someone, as it was considered poor table manners, but right now she was feeling a tiny bit mischievous. In truth, she had every intention of pulling back and eating it herself.

"Okay, sure, I'll try it."

"What?"

His face drew near as he leaned forward across the table. Reflexively, she tried to retract her hand, but he grabbed it and deftly directed the cookie into his mouth. In the span of a few seconds, he

chewed, swallowed, and it was all over.



“Yeah, that sure is sweet, all right. Just the way you like it.”

He pulled away as swiftly as he had approached; Violette watched in a daze as he brushed the sugar from his lips. Then, a beat later, the realization and shame hit her all at once. Her temperature flared, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was blushing.

Her fingers were empty now, which drove home the lingering sensation of that which they had touched. Her brain boiled as she clutched her hand to her chest. Really, it was the slightest brush, too quick to even feel his warmth, but she had felt them.

His...his lips!

The contact was too brief to have even registered their softness or elasticity; it wouldn't even count as a kiss. But because of that, her imagination had free rein to fill in the blanks. Where *exactly* did she want him to touch her—and with what?

“Vio? Sorry, that was bad manners, I know. Are you upset?” Yulan asked.

“I'm...I'm not-not-*not* upset...”

“And what does that mean?!”

“I'm not upset, but I am!”

“Aww, I'm sorry... I couldn't stop myself...”

As he attempted to repent, Violette turned away and pretended to pout in order to mask the sound of her own thumping heartbeat. She knew full well that she was blushing all the way to her ears; and Yulan had surely seen it. But this was precisely the sort of playful exchange they both enjoyed very much.

Chapter 117: What You Gave Me

THEIR TIME TOGETHER started out with lots of laughs and a dash of feigned anger, but over time, Yulan slowly grew quiet. His gaze wavered to and fro, like he was struggling with something...torn between two choices.

“Is something wrong?” Violette asked. She set her teacup down onto its saucer with both hands as she turned her body toward him, demonstrating that she was prepared to lend an ear. At this, he seemed to cave, and his pursed lips finally parted.

“Well, uh...just now...or rather, earlier today during break...your sister came by.”

“Huh?”

“Said she wanted to study for the tests with me.”

This unexpected blow rendered her speechless. She was the one who had asked, yet she somehow lacked the fortitude to withstand the answer. She never imagined that he and Maryjune would become friends...or rather, she hadn't *wanted* to imagine it. She froze like an ice sculpture, shock carved into the lines of her face, while her mind overflowed with the exact brand of unpleasant images that she'd been trying to avoid.

The very first moment she had become aware of her feelings for Yulan was when Maryjune made an offhand remark at the dining table. The girl's words brought to light a desire hidden in the very deepest recesses of Violette's heart—proof of how damaging it was to her psyche. Now she felt even *more* panic.

Her balled fists began to sweat. Meanwhile, her throat was suddenly as parched as a desert, despite the gulp of tea not seconds ago...but perhaps it was for the best that it felt as constricted as it did, because otherwise she might have screamed: *No! Don't choose her over me!* She was overcome with a deep and indescribable terror, and it threatened to rampage out of control.

“So, uh, I think you should give your old tests to her, and I'll

borrow them from someone else,” Yulan explained.

“What? But we’re four tests into the school year!”

“As long as I can get my hands on last year’s test questions, I can figure something out. But your sister doesn’t have connections like I do.”

“Who in the world will you ask? Hasn’t everyone already given their old tests to someone by now?”

“Ha ha ha... Like I said, I’ll figure it out.”

He made it sound so easy, but in reality, it would surely pose a challenge. For one thing, this particular method of test prep wasn’t exactly universally applauded, and for another, second-years without any first-year friends were likely to have thrown their old tests away by now. Those who held on to them generally did so because they already had someone in mind to lend them to. Why else would anyone go out of their way to neatly preserve exam papers from an entire year ago?

“Well, wouldn’t it be easier to just share them with Maryjune?” Violette asked.

“And you’re fine with that?”

Yulan stared directly into her eyes, his expression deathly serious. She faltered, her shoulders wavering ever so slightly, and knew at once that he must have seen it. His penetrating gaze would not allow her to wriggle out of this one. Yet she felt no fear—was it because of their history together? Because she knew for a fact that he would never try to hurt her?

“Because I’m not,” he continued.

“What?”

He slumped his shoulders like a child caught misbehaving, with a pained smile that suggested he was bracing himself for the fallout to come. “When you’re with Claudia...I hate it. I feel left out.”

Violette knew of Yulan’s discomfort with Claudia. Because of it, she was all the more grateful that he had made arrangements for her, and she still didn’t know how she would ever repay him. She understood his internal struggle and his selfless patience...or at least, she thought she did.

But now she realized that it wasn’t Claudia upsetting him at all—it

was her. Violette. Before today, she never would have imagined that was the case. She had been incredibly arrogant to assume she knew all there was to know about him just because they had grown up together. Not only that, but now his sacrifice delighted her all the more. What a despicably greedy person she was.

Her pulse quickened. If this was what love felt like, it was quite easily bought, wasn't it? Especially considering she was consumed by paralyzing fear not moments ago.

"I-I'm the same."

"Yeah?"

"I...don't like it."

The door had been flung open, and now she simply needed the courage to barrel through it. This was far more important than any feelings of shame or fear. As she conceded each point, he nodded along gently, reassuring her that he was listening—that he understood. She didn't need to raise her voice to be heard.

"I feel left out too... It's not fair... I want to study with you myself."

With each word she spoke, the emotions took form inside her chest. She never even realized she felt this way until now. Was this the "possessiveness" she so deeply feared? It resembled the envy she felt in the first timeline—the jealous obsession that directly led to her arrest. Except...softer. Much, much, softer.

"But more than that, I don't want you to have a hard time. So I won't lend my tests to Maryjune, and I won't stop you two from studying together."

Her expression indicated she wasn't thrilled about it, yet her words encouraged it to happen. She wasn't putting up a tough front. Granted, she wasn't *accepting* of it, either, but she was tolerant. Perhaps it was something akin to the way Yulan had felt when arranging a study group with Claudia. She wanted the best for him, and while it was nothing as grand as unconditional love, it had the potential to grow into something bigger.

"Instead...if you want...after tests are over, I'd like it if...if we could talk."

Much as she wanted to conceal the blush on her cheeks, she cared

about getting her point across. These conflicting feelings wrestled back and forth until they reached a compromise: an averted gaze that settled slightly south of Yulan's. She'd always thought of him as a boy with an expressive face, but as she focused on his nose and lips, she realized just how much he communicated with his eyes. It was hard to read anything from a closed mouth.

The silence persisted. "Er...would that be an imposition?" she asked belatedly.

"No, no, no imposition at all. But..."

At his lack of response, she started to think perhaps she was asking too much. Sweat trickled down her back as she worried that her greed had crossed a line. In shame, she shifted her gaze...and that was when she noticed his ears burning red behind his hair.

"Sorry, uh...c-could you look away for a minute?!" Bashfully, he tried to hide his face behind his hands—large, yes, but not large enough to hide his cheeks *and* his ears. His eyes were so glossy, one might have thought he had been moved to tears.

This was not the usual Yulan, with his boyish personality hidden beneath masculine attributes; this was an adorable creature that Violette felt the urge to protect. His expression looked stiff, but the slight pout reminded her of the little boy she once knew. He was simultaneously the man of her dreams and the little brother she had grown up alongside. She giggled at him.

"Don't *laugh*, okay?! I wasn't expecting you to say that," he complained.

"Well, I'm very sorry to have startled you. But I must insist, it's the honest truth."

"Yes, I know that, thank you! I know you wouldn't say it purely to be polite... Ugh, I liked it better when *you* were blushing."

"You must have shocked the blush right out of me. I mean, it's not often you get this embarrassed about something!"

"La la la, I can't hear you!"

"Oh, stop. It's cute!"

"I don't *want* to be cute!"

"Hee hee. I'm sorry."

“You don’t mean a word of it! One more giggle and I’m stuffing a piece of this chocolate into your mouth.”

“Try it and I’ll retaliate with a sugary-sweet cookie.”

“Sorry, but that’s no punishment for me!”

It was a happy moment, their laughter blending together in perfect harmony, and it lasted all the way until the final bell rang.

Chapter 118: Dreams and Beyond

EVERYTHING VIOLETTE HAD SAID to Yulan was the honest truth. She would sooner swallow her petty jealousy than let him struggle. However, tiny embers still smoldered in her gut.

“Lady Violette, it’s time to get dressed for supper,” said Marin.

“Yes, I know,” Violette answered sourly.

For hours after she got home, she sat on the sofa and hugged a cushion to her chest. She wasn’t depressed, merely...sulking. She had tried her best to choke it down, of course, but now her chest was burning. Though her perpetual aura of sorrow was gone, with a scowl on her face, she was decidedly *not* in high spirits.

“Is something wrong, my lady?” Marin asked.

“I...suppose you could say that.”

No one was at fault, except perhaps herself. If she had asked Yulan to say no to Maryjune, he would have; it was her better judgment that kept her from doing so. She had no regrets in that regard. From the bottom of her heart, she believed it was the right choice.

“I’m just fed up with my own pettiness, that’s all,” she explained.

“Sounds like some rather complicated introspection.”

It’s not fair. I’m jealous. What about me? These churlish feelings had piled up in her heart, and while they were slowly melting away, it would take time before she could fully accept it. That liquefaction process manifested itself in the frown on her face.

Because she was used to being held to impossible standards, she had internalized a lot of that same messaging. She was harsh on herself, yet forgiving with others—the ultimate people-pleaser. Instead of reflecting on one’s own faults, one could simply pin the blame on Violette and she would accept it. The result was Bellerose, and...well, the entire Vahan household.

Conversely, every time she was treated kindly, she felt both joy and...confusion. Framed in a positive light, it could be called modesty,

but in reality, she lacked the proper consideration for her own well-being. In fact, from Marin's perspective, Violette seemed to seek injury of her own accord. Meanwhile, the adults who made her this way lived happy lives without ever taking responsibility for it.

"As it appears you are unwell, I shall bring your dinner to your room. There's still time if you have any personal requests."

"In that case...could they make me the salmon au gratin we had a while ago?"

"Yes, of course. The kitchen is prepared to make your favorites at any time."

"Thank you. After I get dressed, I'll rest for a while... Wake me when it's ready."

"Yes, my lady."

Slowly, Violette rose to her feet and disappeared into her private chamber. The dirty laundry could wait until later; Marin straightened the cushion Violette had been clutching and then left the room.

Alone, Violette walked straight to the vanity and sat down to scrutinize her reflection. Her eyes were harder than usual, and though she knew it wouldn't help, she massaged her temples. Barely registering the sigh that left her lips, she picked up the brush and ran its soft bristles through her hair. Thanks to Marin, it had retained its satiny texture, and in fact, seemed to become even glossier the more she brushed it. Again and again, she ran her fingers through it in curiosity.

A full day had passed, yet the floral scent persisted. The slightest rustle of her locks sent it wafting to her nose—not too strong but firmly present. In passing, it was hard to notice, perhaps, but someone who sat and talked with her surely would. And not long ago, someone she loved had done precisely that.

It smells so good... I wonder if he noticed.

Marin had applied this hair treatment from root to end. Had he perceived even the slightest change in her scent, or her hair's shine, or her moisturized skin?

Then again, I suppose he wasn't really looking at me.

The moment the distance between them was at its smallest, she had felt his hand lightly gripping her wrist while his long lashes cast shadows over his downturned golden eyes. His thin lips were even

lighter than she imagined, not quite as soft as hers, a bit chapped...but of course, she'd only touched them for a split second.

Agh, stop thinking about it!

She shook her head vigorously, chasing away the scene unfolding in her mind. She didn't want to watch herself blush, either, so she looked down at her lap, where her hands sat balled into fists. The sensation that had grazed the very tip of her right index finger was no more.

For a single second, time stopped. Her chest churned with a mix of emotions—joy, shame, hesitation, sometimes panic. This was a side of herself she had never known and quite unlike the heart-rending, arrogant obsession that had ruined her before. She never knew the slightest warmth could put her on cloud nine and make her feel as if she were the happiest girl in the world.

She flopped facedown onto the bed, still in her school uniform. Then she breathed in a lungful of its summery scent and exhaled it like a sigh. She usually didn't enjoy sleeping on her stomach, but today she wanted to bury her face deep into her pillow and plunge herself into a world of darkness.

In her dream, which she was sure to forget upon waking, Yulan was there with his flawless smile. Beside him was...another girl. As Violette watched from a distance, the girl looked over her shoulder, but her face was unnaturally silhouetted by the light. Violette couldn't tell who it was—all she could see was the girl's blissful smile.

It was heartbreaking.

Chapter 119: A Bud Yet to Bloom

AFTER LEAVING VIOLETTE'S CHAMBERS, Marin headed to

the kitchen to pass on her mistress's request. The kitchen staff was divided into two teams: the old hands who were in charge of Violette and the new employees who had come to the Vahan estate with Auld and his family. But they were by no means two warring factions; rather, the split occurred naturally, as those who knew Violette's preferences were henceforth assigned to her meals. The division of labor was entirely logical.

But this is not to say that the complex intricacies of the Vahan household did not extend to their servants. Some, like Marin and the head chef, sided wholly with Violette and felt no loyalty, respect, or trust toward the Vahan patriarch. Of those who hailed from the secondary residence, some saw Violette as a minor sacrifice at most, while others were alarmed at her treatment. Some were able to write it all off as "part of the job."

In other words, none of them presumed above their station. Few truly understood the circumstances of this house...beyond the fact that all of them were, in some way or another, throwing Violette to the wolves.

"Chef Chesuit, I have a request from Lady Violette regarding tonight's supper."

"Oh, yeah? Eating in her room tonight?"

"Yes, sir. She's...not well, it seems."

"Gotcha."

Chesuit had worked in this kitchen since long before Violette was born; Marin had heard he was hired right after Auld and Bellerose were wed. He could be a little rough around the edges, but when it came to food, he was careful, dedicated, and highly particular about his craft. As such, he was both deeply passionate about Violette's dietary education *and* quick to notice that it was backfiring. No matter how exquisite a dish was, if the person on the receiving end struggled to eat it, it was a

failure in his eyes.

Of all the adults Marin had met in her lifetime, Chesuit was the only one she found worthy of her respect. He would always see straight through her lies, yet he never called her out on them...but when the time came to take action, he showed no hesitation. She could easily see why Violette trusted him so much. He was most likely her only ally before Marin arrived.

“She has requested your salmon au gratin, sir.”

“Ah, the gratin? Well then, I’d better start on it now or it won’t have time to cool. I’ll call ya when it’s ready.”

“Please do.”

As the head chef, Chesuit oversaw both teams in the kitchen. Regardless of his personal feelings, all of the food served in this mansion was under his jurisdiction, not just Violette’s portion. Violette knew he didn’t have time to fine-tune one person’s meal, which was why she rarely asked it of him. Accordingly, he kept the kitchen well stocked to accommodate any requests that did arise.

First things first, I should go and put her uniform in the wash, Marin thought to herself. I’ll also need to prep for tonight’s bath... I’ll need soap, and hair oil, and—

“Mari,” he called.

“Yes?”

“Eat this real quick before you go. Won’t be time for it once I start cooking for the little lady.”

With an airy *clink*, Chesuit set a white porcelain plate onto the counter. Placed upon it was a slice of toast laden with potato salad—repurposed leftovers from breakfast or lunch, most likely, but one would never know it from the taste. The golden potatoes and mixed veggies smelled heavenly, and one whiff was all it took to rouse her hunger.

“Thank you,” Marin told him.

“Anytime.”

A noble might think it poor manners to eat while standing, but she was no highborn girl, and as such, she had never been formally trained in matters of etiquette. What she prioritized was efficiency

above all. Rather than waste time finding a chair to sit in, it was faster to eat this morsel on the spot and simply hand the plate back.

She picked up the toast with her bare hands and stuffed it into her mouth. It was so delicious, it scarcely deserved to be categorized as junk food. The mashed potatoes, the corn, the peas... The flavor was too plain to be described with flowery adjectives, but to a woman like Marin with an unsophisticated palate, it was perfect in its own way. Five bites later, the plate was empty, and her stomach was 60 percent full.

“That was excellent, thank you,” she told Chesuit.

“Glad to hear it.”

“I should get going now.”

As Chesuit raised his hand in a casual farewell, Marin turned and rushed out of the kitchen. When she peeked in on Violette, she found the girl asleep in her uniform, so she set out a change of clothes in advance and then turned her attention to other tasks. Someone else was in charge of cleaning the bathroom, so Marin’s duty was to restock the towels and amenities—and, if needed, bring in her own personal bath kit for the purpose of assisting Violette in the tub. All that remained after that was to check the stock of each individual product, confirm tomorrow’s schedule, and once it was time for supper, report that Violette would not be in attendance.

I think it’s about time.

Checking her wristwatch, she found that it was nearly time for everyone to gather in the dining hall. Most nights, Elfa and Maryjune would arrive first, followed by Auld, at which point the meal would begin; Violette always made an effort to arrive ten minutes ahead of the scheduled time, but whether this counted as early or late depended entirely on who was already present. Frankly, Marin wished she could send someone else to report the news in her place, but she couldn’t trust anyone else to deliver the message with the required tact. The head of household was notoriously quick to twist everyone’s words to suit his own biased perceptions.

She walked as quickly as possible, careful not to let her footsteps resound too loudly, and stood before the open doors leading into the dining hall. While the other servants were busy carrying dishes to the table, the Vahan family was seated and waiting. Suppressing a growl,

Marin let the emotion fall from her face. In exchange for withholding her anger, she also withheld any pretense of affability.

“Terribly sorry to interrupt.” She bowed slowly, enunciating every last syllable so as to remove any doubt that they could hear her. “Lady Violette is not feeling well, and so she will be dining in her room this evening.”

“Wait, what? Is she okay?” asked Maryjune.

“With enough rest, I believe she will recover in no time.”

“Oh, okay... Um, I’d like to go see her after supper! Is that all right?”

Hell no, it’s not, Marin wanted to say, but the words never broke through to the surface. She had carefully honed her mask over the years. Instead, to ensure she wouldn’t upset the little princess or the tyrant across from her, she forced her lips to curve. She knew she needed to decline as gently as—

“Don’t you dare, Mary.”

Before she could retrieve the right words from her vocabulary, however, someone offered a helping hand—a diseased, rotting hand that she would rather die than grasp. The hand of a man who was somehow both angry and worried. *How very skilled he is at multitasking*, Marin sneered to herself.

“You might catch whatever disgusting disease she has,” Auld continued, looking at his favorite daughter with an expression that suggested the very concept saddened him. In his mind, the *diseased* daughter didn’t exist at all, apparently. Likewise, Maryjune apologized for her thoughtlessness but otherwise didn’t seem to register anything amiss.

It felt like Marin was being forced to watch the world’s most insipid stage play, with a cast of actors all drunk on their own hype, chewing the scenery without consideration for anyone in the audience. *Ah yes, the perfect family. Spare me*. She had watched them trample over Violette to reaffirm their love for each other so many times now, she couldn’t be bothered to keep count. At the very least, it was more times than she had fingers and toes. They had shared a roof for less than a year, but it had taken them no time at all to rip holes in everything Marin held dear.

“I’ll be going now.” She knew no one was even paying attention to her anymore. Nevertheless, she committed to her duty, bowing politely before excusing herself.

Now that nearly everyone was gathered within the vicinity of the dining hall, the rest of the house felt deserted. Chesuit was still in the kitchen, but most of the other servants were used as table dressing for the loving family suppertime. Marin’s next task was to retrieve Violette’s meal from Chesuit and take it to her private quarters. Fortunately, her bedroom was nowhere near the others, so the risk of encountering any other Vahan after supper was low, but Maryjune could be unpredictable.

Lately, Marin had finally started to detect signs of positive change. Slowly but surely, over the past decade, this little bud had started to bloom. She dearly wanted to cultivate it, of course, but it was planted in a tiny patch of healthy soil surrounded by salted earth. If she took her eyes off it for a single second, it was liable to wilt. Yet somehow, mysteriously, it hadn’t.

Her mission was to keep this little bud alive at all costs—away from those who would pluck it from the ground, in a place where no one would bother it—until the day someone came along and made it blossom in full. And when that day came, Marin would call him *Master*.

Chapter 120: Comrades in Conflict

FROM THAT DAY ONWARD, Violette and Yulan slowly started to see less and less of each other. Part of it was simply the looming test week and an increased focus on studying, yes, but they were speaking with less frequency than any testing period that had come before, and quite obviously, it was because of Maryjune.

Violette had seen her sister and Yulan studying together on multiple occasions now—though usually accompanied by Gia or a handful of other students. But since Violette had assumed the study sessions would be one-on-one, this was a welcome relief. Maryjune triggered Violette’s worst insecurities simply by existing. If at any point she saw the two of them alone together, she was afraid she might truly lose her cool.

Ultimately, the fact remained that Maryjune and the other students were eating up the time Yulan used to spend with Violette. And because the study group was so large, they met up more often to accommodate everyone. But of course, Violette had prepared herself for this outcome, so she had no intention of complaining. Luckily, she had found a new friend to keep her from feeling too lonely.

“Shall we take a break, Lady Vio?” asked Rosette.

“What, already?” Violette replied.

“It’s been long enough that I’m running out of steam.”

The salon they had reserved was, by pure coincidence, the same one where she and Yulan had enjoyed that peaceful moment together. It wasn’t that long ago, yet it felt as though she was wistfully reflecting on better days whenever she thought of it. This time, however, the table was laden with textbooks, not treats.

“I put in an order for a pot of tea just now, and I requested the chocolate tarts,” Rosette continued.

“When did you do that? I completely missed it!”

“Yes, you were quite intensely focused at the time.”

They moved to the tea table, which was barely large enough for

the tea set atop it, and each poured themselves a cup. Violette added milk and sugar to hers, while Rosette drank it straight. As for the chocolate tarts, there were two varieties: one topped with whipped cream and one with berry syrup. The former was served to Rosette and the latter to Violette, as if by default. After the waiter left, they looked at each other and grinned.

“Have you discovered your sweet tooth, Rosette?”

“I should warn you, Lady Vio, that one is dark chocolate.”

Giggling, they traded plates. These mix-ups happened so often, there was really no point in trying to correct the record. Instead, it had become something of a running gag.

Violette knew that sugary-sweet and cute things fit Rosette’s aesthetic and clashed with her own; likewise, Rosette held a similar perspective toward bitter foods. But Violette had long since stopped worrying about it. Back when time first rewound itself, this was but one of the many petty struggles to which she had resigned herself. Still, it had taken her some time. Only now could she say with confidence that she had truly overcome it.

Slowly, she savored her dessert: a crispy crust surrounding deliciously sweet chocolate, garnished with a healthy dollop of whipped cream. As she felt a smile form on her lips, she thought back to the last time she was in this room. “Now *this* is how chocolate ought to be,” she said with a sigh.

“Compared to what?” asked Rosette.

“Recently, I had the misfortune of eating the most awfully bitter piece of chocolate. I was with a friend who hates sugar as much as you do, and he was enjoying it, but...I couldn’t take it.”

“I say, Lady Vio, you have the biggest sweet tooth of anyone I’ve ever known.”

“Conversely, I was eating snowball cookies, and when he tried one, he had a similar reaction.”

“Ha ha ha! I sympathize with your friend.”

“Hee hee. I suspect you two might have quite a bit in common.”

At first, Rosette and Yulan seemed nothing alike, but upon further contemplation, they had some commonalities: the way other people perceived them, the way they chose to handle those perceptions, their

preferences, their worries. Of course, Violette only had a limited frame of reference, so she was possibly off the mark. If nothing else, they were both people Violette felt drawn to.

“So, this friend of yours is male?” Rosette prompted.

“Oh, I apologize. I suppose it’s rather impolite to compare a lady to a gentleman.”

“No, no, I’m flattered to remind you of another friend! Besides, there’s no denying that my tastes and hobbies skew toward the masculine.”

To Rosette, it felt as though Violette understood her true nature far better than all those who saw her as the perfect princess. More humbling than the most well-articulated compliment was the notion that she resembled a close friend. Deep down, however, she had an inkling of precisely who “he” was, and she sensed the two of them would never truly get along. Still, even *she* could see the resemblance, loath as she was to admit it.

“I’ll introduce you to him sometime. I can’t promise you’ll like him, though. He’s a *boy*, after all,” Violette joked.

“Well, I would certainly love to say hello,” Rosette replied after a pause.

Smiling sweetly, Violette nodded. Rosette could tell she was sincerely looking forward to the introduction and knew it was because she trusted Rosette as a good friend. All the more reason, then, to keep her encounter with Yulan a secret. Instead, she smiled back, all the while wondering *how* exactly dear Violette would introduce him to her.

Chapter 121:

One Less

SLOWLY BUT SURELY, something was building up inside her—so light, she couldn't even feel it, like the dust in a storage closet. Bit by bit, it piled up, and when she could stand its weight no longer, she would be forced to admit the truth. It wasn't that she hadn't noticed—she simply hadn't *wanted* to notice.

One night, as tests were approaching and Violette had started to use studying as an excuse to skip dinner...

"Wait, so starting tomorrow, he won't be here?"

"That's correct. I'm told the old master has summoned him."

"Grandfather...?"

The previous patriarch of the Vahan household was Violette's grandfather on her mother's side. In recent years, he had retired to a mansion deep in the recesses of Vahan territory, but he was still highly regarded and entrusted with authority by the royal family. He may have retired but remained very much in charge.

Supposedly it was her grandfather who had christened her Violette, but in all honesty, she could scarcely remember him at all. She had seen him in passing at her mother's funeral, but that was about it. Perhaps he had only named her because Bellerose herself was too dysfunctional.

Put bluntly, he was the sort of person Violette wanted to avoid. Granted, she couldn't remember ever speaking to the man, so perhaps her impression of him was biased. With that being said, given that he almost assuredly knew of everything that transpired within this house, why then had he chosen to stay silent? His daughter had died, and the most he bothered to do was attend her funeral? Still, Violette couldn't claim to resent him or even dislike him. In all honesty, she forgot he existed half the time, and the feeling was likely mutual.

"How very peculiar," Violette mused. "Hard to believe Grandfather would want anything to do with him... Then again, maybe they've been in contact this whole time and I simply never knew."

“It seems that is not the case; the master himself was quite alarmed.”

“Well, no wonder the servants are all so busy. Shouldn’t you be helping, Marin?”

“I serve under *you* exclusively, and as such, it’s neither my circus nor my monkeys.”

Through the mirror, Violette watched Marin braid her freshly detangled hair. The news about her grandfather came as a surprise, but more than that, she was delighted to learn of her father’s upcoming absence. All her life, she had barely spent any time living with him. He was a foreign presence at best.

“He expects to be gone for a week, during which time I shall bring all your meals directly to your room.”

“My, a whole *week*? Does it really take that long to reach Grandfather’s mansion?”

Violette had heard that the journey took more than ten hours one way. With the right mode of transportation, one could get there and back within the span of a single day, but a born-and-bred aristocrat like Auld couldn’t possibly endure such a grueling itinerary. Leisure was an essential element. Evidently, the commotion audible around the house was from his efforts to adjust his work schedule and arrange for bodyguards.

“Is anyone else going with him?”

“Alas, Lady Maryjune has school to attend, and it seems the mistress of the house has chosen to remain here. It won’t be a fun vacation, after all.”

“Not for *him*, that’s for sure. Grandfather’s the one person he can’t boss around.”

Considering Auld was an adulterer who impregnated his mistress and ultimately drove Bellerose to her death, it was easy to imagine why he might feel intimidated, but scariest of all was the fact that the old man never uttered a single word. Insults were one thing, but Auld was uniquely ill-equipped to handle silence. As for what the two might discuss, Violette had plenty of ideas, but none seemed to fit.

“Well, at least I’ll get to relax for a little while,” she said with a shrug.

“Indeed. If only you didn’t need to study for exams, I would let you relax to your heart’s content.”

“Frankly, with one less thing to worry about, I might actually be able to focus.”

In actuality, Violette spent most of her study time on campus with Rosette, so Auld’s absence hardly changed anything. Still, it would make the trip home a tiny bit less depressing. A younger Violette would have yearned for her father to come home, but that girl no longer existed. Frankly, someone so toxic was welcome to go live with her grandfather for all she cared.

“Now then, I wish you pleasant dreams, my lady,” said Marin with an uncommonly warm smile on her face.

“I will. Good night, Marin.”

And so, hoping for a meager week of peace, Violette crawled into bed and closed her eyes.

Chapter 122: Jasmine in Bloom

VIOLETTE ATE THREE MEALS per day. School lunches aside, she was expected to sit at the family dining table in the mornings and evenings. If she didn't want to attend, then she would need a carefully constructed excuse to avoid causing any concern; otherwise, it was often less hassle to show up and get it over with. Truly, there was nothing more obnoxious than mandatory harmony.

These twice-daily family meals were sheer torture for Violette. It was like sitting in an electric chair, never knowing when someone might press the button to end her life. But this week, for seven merciful days, she was free from it. After eating breakfast in her private chambers, she was idling away the time before they were scheduled to depart.

"Seeing as we have time, my lady, shall we try a different hairstyle?"

"Huh?"

Marin was standing next to the sofa, holding a hairbrush and pins. Mere moments ago she was tidying up near the door—when did she get here? Sometimes she seemed to have downright superhuman speed... unless Violette was simply imagining it, that is.

"Rest assured—your usual style is gorgeous. I simply thought this might be a fitting opportunity to try something new," Marin explained.

"Well, yes, I see your point, but since when do *you* know how to style hair?"

"I consider myself rather dexterous."

Marin had kept her hair short for as long as Violette had known her; supposedly, long hair would only get in the way of her work, so she trimmed it regularly. In contrast with her wholehearted devotion to Violette, she insisted that she cared solely about efficiency when it came to her own appearance. When Violette suggested that she pamper herself a bit more, her response was, "I prefer to give rather than receive." If it made her happy, Violette was in no place to argue.

“Let me know if it hurts at all.”

Marin’s hands moved without trepidation, suggesting she already had an end result in mind. Judging from how well equipped she was, it was clear she was prepared to do this at any time but hadn’t mentioned it until now...because she knew Violette didn’t want to stand out any more than she usually did. Usually Marin kept a straight face, so it was rare to see her in such a good mood. It was heartwarming to think she was that excited to style Violette’s hair.

“There, all done.”

“Thank you.”

From her deft hands, one would think she was well practiced, but Marin was merely giving it her very best for Violette’s sake. Violette knew it was for the same reason that a woman like Marin, who only ever brushed her hair at most, was in possession of such cute barrettes.

Violette ran a hand over her braids, tight enough to hold fast but not so tight as to hurt. It felt strange for her neck to be so exposed, but it was refreshing to have all that hair away from her face. Using a hand mirror, she checked the back, where the braids were pinned neatly together in a bun using a blue tortoiseshell barrette. From the front, only the pleats on the sides were visible; without a mirror, the only strands of gray that still dangled within her line of sight were her bangs.



“Wow... I love it! Not only is it gorgeous, but it’s practical too!” she gushed.

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ve learned a lot of different braiding styles, and if you’d like, we can try a different one tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it very much.”

Her hair had only grown this long due to her childhood trauma. Whenever Bellerose would bring in a barber to cut her hair short, it felt as though pieces of her body were being hacked away, each strand like a severed limb. And though hair contained no nerve endings, every time someone took scissors to it, she could feel the “pain” of her identity being stripped off.

To this day, the thought of getting a haircut gave her anxiety. But now, instead of screaming for their lives, her poor strands of hair had someone who would cherish them gently. At long last, growing her hair out proved a worthwhile effort.

“I should leave soon. Sorry I couldn’t finish my food.”

“Not to worry. It’s the chef’s fault for serving you too much.”

On the table, there were a few untouched treats still waiting, and judging by the amount of food, Violette wasn’t expected to eat it all in one sitting. She had requested smaller portions since she’d already eaten breakfast, but Chef Chesuit tended to get distracted whenever he made Violette’s favorites. Fortunately, anything that wasn’t half-eaten would be repurposed as Marin’s lunch, so it wouldn’t go to waste.

“All right, I’m heading out.”

“Take care on your way to school, my lady.”

The two parted ways at the front door; waving, Violette climbed into the back of the chauffeur’s car. As the engine hummed to life, she pulled her hand mirror from her book bag. It was circular in shape and the size of her palm, and as she admired her new style, she felt a tiny flicker of hope in her chest.

I wonder what Yulan will think.

She hoped they would have the chance to speak...and that he’d smile and tell her that she looked nice.

As she watched the chauffeur drive away with Violette, Marin thought back to their earlier exchange. Long had she yearned to share a moment like that with her mistress, and at last, her wish had come true. Slowly but surely, Violette was discovering her own self-worth. It was still too soon for her to love herself, but over time, if she could find all the traits she didn't outright despise, perhaps one day she could craft a version of herself she liked. Suffice it to say, Marin was prepared to lend a hand at any time.

I kept it simple today to ease her into it, but what about tomorrow? She'd look great with a big ribbon in her hair... Maybe not too high, so it won't feel heavy...

In her mind, she imagined Violette with a few different hairstyles. They were all adorable, beautiful, and magnificent in their own ways, but what mattered above all was Violette's happiness. Yes, some people were willing to make sacrifices in the name of looking good, but anything that made Violette suffer was strictly off the table.

I should go back to her quarters and—

Right then, as Marin turned her heel to go back inside...*that woman* was standing there, not a sound to be heard, no presence to be felt.

"Lady Elfa...?"

"Have you finished seeing her off?"

"Yes, my lady. I'll be returning to my duties now."

"I see... Have fun."

Elfa smiled brightly, like a girl a fraction of her age, and it was easy to see that this was precisely what Maryjune would look like when she grew up. The two were identical, not just in appearance, but in the very aura they exuded—both of them the physical embodiment of kindness, love, and patience. Looking at her sweet, soft smile, one might be convinced that Elfa had never known hate, be it toward another or toward herself. She seemed like the sort of delicate, waifish woman who was incapable of violence.

And yet...

What was that?

Marin could only watch, rooted to the spot, as Elfa turned and casually wandered back into the house. The weather was cold, and yet sweat began to bud on her skin. Then she noticed her hands trembling and hastily clutched them together, rubbing her fingers. Her pulse throbbed in her ears. She was terrified.

Of what, though? Elfa hadn't harmed her or even insulted her. She only ever quietly hovered at Auld's side with a smile on her face. As much as Marin reviled her—even *resented* her—she never felt afraid of her. Until now.

“Ngh!”

She shook her head vigorously, clearing away the emotions that had started to take root in her chest. She was mistaken—she had to be. With a deep breath, she shifted her focus back to her work. As she busied herself with cleaning and laundry, her heartbeat slowed, and her hands stopped shaking.

But the icy unease she felt at the pit of her stomach never quite faded.

Chapter 123: Memento

“O H, IT’S RAVISHING! You wear it so well!”

“Thank you, but please, Rosette, you’re embarrassing me!”

After school, Violette met up with Rosette to study for exams, as was their routine of late. The moment the princess laid eyes on her, however, she started fawning over Violette’s new hairstyle. It was flattering, yes, but also mortifying. Violette wasn’t used to receiving compliments, and she didn’t know how to handle them. It made her feel ever so ticklish and...oddly, weightless.

“That barrette is the perfect color for your hair. Did you choose it yourself?” asked Rosette.

“No, it was my maid. She’s worked for my family for years now.”

“Ah, I see. She must be very attentive, then.”

With regard to preferences, one could simply ask their target directly, but when it came to what naturally suited that person, it wasn’t that simple. Often the subject would have no awareness of it. No amount of personal trivia would help here; it all came

down to paying close attention on a regular basis. In that sense, Marin knew Violette better than anyone.

“They say the people around you are a reflection of who you are, so it sounds like this servant is a treasure indeed.”

“Yes, you could say she’s...family to me.”

“She must be a wonderful person to have earned such an honor.”

Violette didn’t know what “family” was actually *like*, of course, but if she were asked to imagine it, Marin would be front and center, without question. She didn’t care about blood ties or social status; what mattered was that she wanted to spend her life with Marin, exactly as she had all these years—mistress and servant, no closer, no farther. Their bond was one of total trust; if she were to express her wish to be together forever, then *family* was the word that fit the best. But of course, in a society that worshipped class stratification above all else,

this was tantamount to sacrilege.

Knowing Rosette didn't care about such distinctions, however, there was no need to lie or evade the subject. Of the many unexpected traits the princess possessed, her open-minded tolerance and respect were two things that matched her reputation exactly. Gender and status aside, she was a human being with a beautiful smile and a pure heart—exactly the sort of person Violette one day hoped to be.

“Perhaps I should change things up myself one of these days,” Rosette mused.

“Oh, that could be fun. Do you braid your hair yourself?”

“Most days. Unless I'm to wear something elaborate, in which case I ask the help.”

Rosette's waist-length hair, worn half-up in loose braids and decorated with a large ribbon, was her trademark feature. Unlike Violette's, however, it was pin-straight, and while this seemed appealing at first, it had its share of downsides.

“It rarely gets tangled, but I can't get it to hold a curl whatsoever. It always falls flat,” Rosette explained.

“I *wish* I had that problem.”

“You don't, trust me! It's so frustrating, I always end up settling for my usual style.”

“Well, your usual style suits you very well, in my opinion.”

“Why, thank you.”

Smiling bashfully, she twirled a strand around her finger. It fell away, perfectly straight—a testament to its natural resilience. If Violette tried the same thing, she'd make it tangle.

Though their hair gleamed with the same sheen, their haircare routines were quite different. For someone like Violette, who only recently took an interest in these things, it was fascinating, and she immensely enjoyed their long discussions about haircare stores and all their many products. This was something she never had with her old posse, who offered her nothing but shallow praise, and for good reason—Violette didn't know how to polish herself outside of adding on more and more accessories. Looking back, she realized she only ever ruined the beauty that was already there. *Well, at least I'm doing better these days.*

“That hair accessory is from your kingdom, right? For a translucent gem, it has such a vibrant color,” Violette commented.

“Whenever a new baby is born into the royal family, tradition dictates that we have special accessories made for them from the best Lithosian jewels mined that year. This is from my birth year, and so are these earrings, and I have a necklace as well... Whenever there’s some sort of formal event, I’m required to wear the whole set. Saves me having to decide what to wear, I suppose.”

“Oh, lucky you! I always have such a hard time choosing.”

“Exactly, which is why I had some everyday accessories made for me as well. That way I never have to choose.”

One could hardly wear formal accessories for everyday occasions, and vice versa. Even if the two were similar in design, the distinction was important. Luckily, there were a great many high-quality jewels mined during her birth year, so she was able to order a wide variety of accessories without issue.

“I’d love to commission something with a Lithosian jewel sometime, but the import restrictions are simply too high,” Violette sighed. “With your set as a frame of reference, I think I know what I’m looking for... I suppose I’ll just have to cross the border myself.”

She wasn’t terribly interested in accessories; the gaudy baubles currently sparkling in her closet were only purchased out of necessity. If anything, the cheap little trinkets Marin gave her were worth far, far more in sentimental value alone. Whenever she finally moved out of the Vahan estate, she’d only take the latter.

Therefore, this was the first jewel she’d ever actively wanted for herself. To her, it was a symbol of Rosette, and she didn’t need a big one—just a little something to keep as a memento. As she knew she couldn’t expect her stupid father to buy it for her, she planned to sell off the jewels she already had in order to afford it.

On second thought, now that she had broached the subject, she could see a few glaring flaws in her plan. Previously, she had only considered the cost of the gem itself, but now she needed to factor in a trip there and back. Hard to say for sure whether she’d even have the opportunity to cross the border. Worst-case scenario, she could send Marin...

“Oh, um, in that case, I could...” As Violette mumbled to herself,

Rosette faltered mid-sentence—or, more accurately, changed tack. Stroking her chin, she ruminated for a moment, then nodded and looked up once more. “Say, if you wouldn’t mind terribly, could I give it to you as a gift?”

“What? Oh, I’m so sorry! I really wasn’t trying to imply—”

“No, I know that. I have something in mind that I’d like to give you, that’s all... Your birthday’s coming up, right?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“If it turns out you don’t like it, I’ll refer you to a seller, but... I was, um...rather hoping we could match.”

She peeked at Violette hesitantly, her gaze both hopeful and fearful. It was easy to forget whenever she was surrounded by admirers, but Rosette didn’t actually have many real friends. Lots of acquaintances, certainly, but no one she could trust to treat her like a normal person. She always aspired to have a more innocent friendship, the kind most people experienced in childhood.

As Violette froze, wide-eyed, Rosette panicked and started talking faster. “It doesn’t have to be an accessory, either! It could be stationery, or...or a rock, if you like!”

Nervous people had a way of embarrassing themselves in record time, gesturing wildly and saying whatever came to mind without thinking it through. Violette burst out laughing. “A rock? Hee hee hee! You want to get matching *rocks*?”

Only then did Rosette pause to think about what she’d said, and moments later, she flushed bright red. Perhaps there was some other culture where matching rocks were hip and trendy, but among teenage girls in Duralia, it would be a hard sell.

“Why don’t I just pay for your half of our matching accessories? Call it a belated birthday present,” Violette continued.

“Oh... Yes, I’d love that! Thank you!”

“You acquire the stones, and I’ll figure out how to have them processed. But first, we’ll need to decide what exactly we want.”

“Ideally, I think we’ll want something we can wear on any occasion. Something simple and unassuming.”

“Hmmm... After we finish our exams, we should brainstorm a

bit.”

“Oh, right, *exams*! I think this is the first time I’ve ever found myself wishing they’d come sooner!”

And so they turned back to their forgotten textbooks, their scowls suggesting either an intent to focus or a lack thereof. With a reward dangling in the not-too-distant future, it was torture to drag oneself through the present. Time hastened itself for no one, and in the long run it was more efficient to commit to the task at hand. Alas, their hearts were already elsewhere. It was a sad fact that they could not sleep through the boring parts.

I can’t wait to get it all over with!

It felt strange to live in the present while yearning for the future. For most of her life, the future was something to be feared. After all, what guarantee was there that the happiness she felt in the present would still be there three seconds from now? She didn’t dare hope for a better tomorrow when she knew those hopes would only be betrayed.

But now Violette found herself hopeful for things promised to come. Surprisingly enough, she wasn’t the slightest bit worried that the plans would fall through. First Yulan, and now Rosette... She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she could trust them not to let her down, and that alone meant the world to her.

I want to talk to Yulan too.

Just as she wanted to introduce Yulan to Rosette, she wanted to tell *him* all about *her* as well. Not that she needed the two of them to get along or anything—all she wanted was to gush about the kindhearted girl who had come into her life. She wanted Yulan to see that, for once in her life, she had made a real connection with someone.

And conversely, when the day came in which she finally threw away all her hopes and dreams, she wanted to be able to point him out to Rosette and say: *Yes, that’s him. My lifelong friend, so very like a brother to me, and the first boy I ever fell in love with. That’s the man I love.*

Chapter 124: A Rehearsal of Goodbye

HAVING RETURNED HOME slightly later than usual, Violette had changed into her loungewear and was enjoying a mug of warm milk that Marin had made for her. She wasn't feeling particularly sad, but Marin had brought it to her without asking, so she decided to drink it regardless. With its sweet smell and soothing flavor, it was undeniably one of her favorite treats. Still, she found it strange that Marin wouldn't bother to ask first.

Is something the matter?

As always, Marin's work was flawless in every other aspect. She was never one to let her emotions show on her face; whenever she "smiled," her face softened slightly and not much else. But they had known each other for so long by this point that they could read each other very well. Whenever Violette was feeling down, whenever some part of her was withering, Marin just barely kept her together with this warm, sweet milk that tasted like love. Every drop of happiness she lost, Marin replenished tenfold.

Likewise, it had become part of Marin's routine as well. Whenever she was struggling with something—not to the extent that she needed to send out an SOS but enough to feel frustrated—she would make herself some warm milk. It served as a symbol of love and kindness for both of them.

She doesn't seem sad, exactly... If she's worried about something, I wish she'd let me help. Violette could always try to ask, but she knew Marin wouldn't tell her. They both loved, trusted, and respected each other a great deal—which is precisely why she understood that Marin saw her as a child to be protected.

They were mistress and servant, but they were also like family. Sisters, perhaps, if roles were to be assigned. The older sister sought to protect the younger, and as such, she refused to show any sign of weakness. To Violette, this wasn't a sign of mistrust, but rather, proof that she herself needed to be stronger. She needed to stop making Marin worry all the time.

Well, at least I can rest easy knowing she isn't hurt or sick.

The maid's complexion was healthy, with no sign of injury. Even if, hypothetically, she was concealing bandages under her clothes, at least one other person in this house cared enough to make an injured woman rest. To him, Marin was a child too, and in a sense, he could protect her better than Violette ever could.

That reminds me... I've yet to buy a birthday gift for her this year.

Technically, Violette didn't know when Marin's birthday was. Not because Marin was orphaned as a child—at four, she was old enough to remember her own birthday—but because she refused to let anyone celebrate it. The last time Violette asked, Marin pretended she couldn't remember the date, but if that were the case, then how did she know how old she was? Thus, instead of celebrating her birthday, Violette settled for simply giving her gifts each year. She never said outright that they were *birthday* gifts, rather that she “just felt like it” each time, but she knew she wasn't fooling anyone, least of all Marin.

For her twentieth birthday, since it was a milestone year, Violette gave her a luxury ballpoint pen; most other years, she stuck to consumable goods. Anything too expensive would only be a burden on Marin, so she kept it casual. Originally, this was a cautionary measure to prevent her mother from finding out, but this year she would need to be discreet for a different reason entirely.

“Twenty-one...”

Many years had passed since Violette first brought the scrawny little orphan inside. They had grown up together, with Marin being the first to reach adulthood and Violette hot on her heels. Anyone who had graduated from school could no longer be called a child, regardless of their biological age; after that, young nobles joined the rat race and filled their lives with conspicuous consumption. Violette, meanwhile, wasn't planning to remain a Vahan after graduation, so she wouldn't need to worry about such things.

“I'll need to figure something out for Marin and all the rest...”

As the end of the year loomed, she would soon surpass the reset point of the original timeline. In the beginning, she approached this reset from a defeatist perspective, part of her believing the nightmare would simply repeat itself. But things had changed, and now she was well on her way to finishing her second year at Tanzanite Academy.

Claudia would soon graduate without any sign of an engagement to Maryjune. Before long, Violette would enter completely unknown territory.

At the start of the reset, she had offhandedly decided she would become a nun—but she would need to start planning soon if she was serious about that path. She knew for certain she would leave the Vahan estate, but how would she go about becoming a nun in the first place? Duralia was a religious kingdom, so ladies of nobility were free to join the clergy if they chose. And with the backing of an archbishop, her father surely wouldn't dare to oppose her request, lest he incite the wrath of the church. The only problem was that Violette lacked the one strict requirement to be ordained: a belief in God.

Long after she committed herself to the Heavenly Father, she would surely never stop loving Yulan. Not only was she a sinful, greedy girl, but she didn't even seek repentance for it—the exact *opposite* of virtuous. That being said, if she truly had no other options, she could always bluff her way through it. Her only concern, then, was the impact her absence would have on Marin, Chef Chesuit, and her other loyal servants.

She really didn't want to leave Marin behind in this toxic household. Without Violette around, she would surely succumb to despair. But should they successfully escape together, where would she go? Knowing her history as an escaped orphan of a church, Violette couldn't ask her to *join a nunnery*. At the same time, however, would any other noble family willingly hire a maid with no pedigree or formal training?

Violette's only trustworthy connection was Yulan. He and Marin were tenuously acquainted through her, so perhaps she could ask him to take Marin. Of course, that would mean explaining her entire plan to him, and *that* would probably turn her crush into heartbreak.

She had discovered how to make others happy. She had learned how to worry about people, and she had experienced the guilt of striking innocent bystanders with a poorly wielded blade. She had become considerate of other people's emotions in addition to her own. She had gained a lot of things in equal measure to the sadness of loss. Here in a world that carried on well after it should have ended, she had found meaning, and that alone made this whole year worthwhile.

Violette drank down the sweetest dregs of the warm milk and felt

it spread in her chest, mingling with the sadness. Slowly, it all faded away.

“I’m hungry,” she muttered aloud, partly to mask the other feeling rising inside her. But though her stomach was indeed empty, another part of her was pleasantly full.

Marin had yet to return. *Perhaps I’ll go and summon her for a change*, Violette thought to herself. And right at that exact moment, as if God himself had planned it, there came a knock at the door—small and weak, but loud enough to be heard in a quiet room.

“Yes?”

At first she thought it was Marin—who else would bother coming to her private quarters? But whoever it was, they showed no signs of entering, nor did they respond when she called. Puzzling indeed. Eventually she decided it must be some other servant, or maybe even Maryjune, and so she opened the door carefully.

On the other side stood a small figure with beautiful white hair and blue eyes—traits only two people in this house possessed.

“Good day to you.”

She stood there, wearing a smile that seemed to represent all the world’s love.

“Lady Elfa...?”

Chapter 125: The Abyss Cannot Choose Who Gazes

W*HO IS THIS?* Violette found herself wondering, like an utter dunce. Though they'd barely spoken to one another, she was all too familiar with who this woman was. But her smile was so sublimely beautiful, Violette temporarily forgot that yes, this was her stepmother.

"I apologize for dropping in on you, dear. You haven't been to the dining table in ever so long, and I'm worried about you," said Elfa.

"Oh, I-I apologize..."

Maryjune often said the same thing, asking if she was sick or busy, expressing her concern in both words and tone. Thus far, Violette had simply brushed it off in favor of prioritizing her own mental well-being. She would inevitably be chastised for causing Maryjune to worry, but she knew none of them truly cared whether she showed up at the table—her father least of all. There was no need to compromise. It wasn't good for her health, mental *or* physical.

She always thought Elfa was on her father's side; truly, she acknowledged Violette even less than Auld did. Though she showed no malice and never complained, one would be forgiven for thinking she literally couldn't perceive Violette's presence at all.

Now here she was, this petite and fragile woman whom so many would leap to protect, smiling warmly in the doorway. If she was the Holy Mother, then Auld was her devout follower and Maryjune their angel. Auld worshipped his wife and daughter like they were his entire world. Maryjune flew freely, bolstered by all their love; all the while, Elfa simply stood there, smiling patiently. Or so Violette had imagined.

"I understand your studies are very important, but you mustn't forget to rest. Otherwise you might fall ill on the big day," Elfa continued.

"Yes...you're right. I'll be more careful from now on."

Maryjune's concern was like a silk pillow to the face—soft and sweet, surely a thoughtful gesture, but still suffocating. Violette could tell there was no hostility intended, but that only made it all the more

painful. What she felt with Elfa, however, was akin to the constriction of a long wire wrapped around her body. It was flexible enough that it didn't dig into her skin, but it limited her range of movement and made her joints stiff. There was a chill to it—and a creeping sense of dread, like it was steadily consuming her.

Elfa's smile, her tone, her words all matched her daughter's...and yet Violette couldn't sense any emotion from her at all. No warmth or sweetness to make her feel guilty, no blissful thoughtlessness to make her mad with jealousy, no radiance to make her want to flee. No self-righteousness, no bias, no uncomfortably pure kindness. Nothing. Her smile was empty.

But something about it weighed down on her, squeezing the air from her lungs.

"Dinner service has already ended for tonight, but starting tomorrow, do try to make time to see us, won't you? I worry that you're overexerting yourself," said Elfa.

"Right. Tomorrow it is," Violette answered curtly, staring at the floor and wishing the conversation would end. As ardently as the rest of the world fawned over Elfa's smile, to her, it was nothing short of nauseating. She was desperate for this woman to go away.

"Good, good. Now then, so sorry for the intrusion! I'll be on my way."

"Oh...okay. Thank you for your time."

Starting tomorrow, she would need to stop having every meal brought to her private quarters. She didn't relish the thought, but with her father absent, there would be no harsh rebuke awaiting her. As long as she nodded along to whatever Maryjune said, it would surely be painless...or so she told herself.

As Elfa started to walk off, Violette felt the tension drain from her shoulders. She couldn't begin to explain what she'd been so afraid of, but if she were to try, perhaps "fear of the unknown" was most apt. It was the sort of paranoia that envisioned a concealed blade during a handshake. And when that paranoia took over completely, an empty hand could very well take the form of a weapon—

"Oh, that's right!" Elfa exclaimed suddenly, and Violette nearly leapt out of her skin. "I've come into possession of some *lovely* desserts. Why don't we share them tomorrow? You like desserts, don't you?"

“Well...yes, but...”

“I shall look forward to it!”

“Er...”

Like a child, Elfa grinned gleefully, pelting Violette with a hailstorm of words that could scarcely be called a two-way conversation. Instantly, her body felt like lead. Her shoulders were heavy, her joints ached, and most of all, her lungs screamed for oxygen as though they had collapsed. This feeling lasted long after the woman mercifully departed. With shaking hands, she somehow managed to shut the door, but her palms were slick with sweat.

If what she feared was the unknown, then perhaps all she needed was to know it. With a little understanding, she could handle anything; it could be as simple as that. *Knowledge is power*, as the saying went. But somewhere in her mind, alarm bells were ringing, and a voice was screaming at her, begging her not to find out. Because once she knew, there would be no going back. And sometimes, *that* was the scariest of all.

Chapter 126: Hallucination

BY THE TIME MARIN ARRIVED, having finished all of her prep work, Violette was curled in a ball on the sofa, hugging the cushion and staring blankly into space, unmoving. Marin rushed over and touched her shoulder. Her skin was cold and clammy.

“Lady Violette! What happened? Are you in pain?”

“Marin...”

“One moment and I’ll summon the doct—”

“Lady Elfa just came by.”

Hoping to reassure her panicking maid, Violette spoke in a flat voice, still staring blankly. Instantly, Marin froze, rooted to the spot. Then, with the stiff joints of a rusty robot, she walked over and sat next to her mistress on the sofa. Her eyes were wide with shock, her complexion ghostly pale in anticipation of a looming threat.

She reached out and pressed a hand over Violette’s as she clutched the sofa cushion, trying her very best to console her mistress. Or was it that Marin herself sought reassurance? As with a rock falling into a pond, the ripple effect was intense.

“She was beautiful, and sweet, and kind, and smiling... The perfect mother, really... She didn’t hit me, didn’t insult me... Just said she was worried about me...but...”

Conscious of the horror on Marin’s face, Violette fought to keep her voice calm and level. She didn’t want her maid to panic and take things out of context. But the more she put it into words, the more confused she became. Elfa had smiled at her with no hidden meaning, no barbs in her voice—she only came by out of concern. So why, then, did Violette’s heart play dead the second she appeared? Why was she suddenly terrified, like a frog in a snake’s grasp, of being swallowed whole? Her empty stomach filled with inexplicable disgust, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Marin remembered in that same instant what had happened earlier this morning—the indescribable fear she felt when she

discovered *that woman* standing behind her with no warning. She didn't know if it was the same feeling that gripped Violette now, but clearly Elfa had inspired a negative reaction in both of them.

"Lady Violette..."

Slowly, Violette looked up at her, her timid gaze wavering. Her complexion was pale, but likely from mental fatigue rather than physical. Marin knew that what she was about to say to this girl was the furthest thing from reassuring; in fact, it had the potential to make things worse. But she needed to say it nonetheless.

"Please, you must stay on guard around the lady of the house."

Perhaps it was all merely a hallucination caused by her own anxiety. There was no proof; this was likely mere paranoia. But for Marin, everything nesting in her heart was reality.

"I don't know anything...anything at all about her, but...I just...!"

In a foggy forest, boulders could look like bears. Scared people couldn't see straight; their minds conjured images that weren't really there. And as a result, they were prone to run headfirst into traps.

"I know I shouldn't say this. I shouldn't scare you needlessly. I don't have proof, so I might be overthinking it... I might just be assuming the worst... But still..."

Something about that woman was frightening.

"I'm begging you, please, stay safe. Please. Please!"

I won't ask anything of you. At this point, I don't even want your repentance anymore. So please, just leave this poor girl alone!

"I'm begging you, please, don't hurt her...!"

More than anything in the world—more than any pain or misery—what she feared most was the loss of Violette's fragile smile.

"Oh, Marin..."

As she clung to Violette's shoulders, the curtain of her hair began to tremble. Violette relinquished her grip on the sofa cushion, reaching instead to rub her maid's back—the same thing Marin usually did for her. They clung to each other, sharing their warmth like children huddling in fear of ghosts. Alas, there was no reassurance to be gained from each other this time. All they could do was cower in fear of an unknown monster, praying to a god neither believed in that it was

nothing more than their paranoia playing cruel tricks on them.

Chapter 127: Dreams End, but Reality Marches On

“I’S BEEN EVER so long since the last time we ate together,
hasn’t
it, dear sister?”

“I...suppose so...”

In response to Maryjune’s delighted grin, Violette forced her lips to curl. Hard to say whether it counted as a smile, but fortunately, her flawless makeup concealed most of the awkwardness. She had even less of an appetite today than she did whenever her father was at the table; the most she could manage was a tiny bite of toast. She knew it was a terrible waste of the food the servants had so kindly prepared for her, but if she tried to eat it, she was in danger of vomiting.

“Will you be studying after school before you come home?” Elfa asked Maryjune.

“Yup! The tests are just around the corner, so I need to buckle down!”

“Remember, you mustn’t overdo it. Be sure to take breaks.”

“Thank you, Mother, but I’ll be okay! Yulan always reminds me.”



The sound of her beloved's name on the lips of someone who made her deeply uncomfortable made Violette flinch. She knew Maryjune didn't mean anything by it, but still—people were capable of causing harm without intending to. Was Yulan having a miserable time with her, or were they getting along? Either way, Violette didn't want to picture it. She told herself she didn't need to worry about him, but nevertheless, a seed of jealousy took root.

We just haven't had the chance to talk lately, that's all.

She'd hoped to see him yesterday so she could get his opinion of her new hairstyle, but alas. Usually she saw him either at lunchtime or after school, but both of those slots were full. Current study group aside, Yulan was something of a social butterfly; whenever she caught a glimpse of him, he was always with someone different.

Once exam week was over, they'd surely find time to catch up. Yulan was a man of his word—he'd keep even the most casual of promises. She knew this, and yet it felt like a damnable eternity from now. Typically she avoided visiting him between classes, since they'd only have time for a few words at most, and she didn't want to bother him, but...

I wish I could see him, just for a minute.

The unease that swirled in her chest had faded considerably overnight. She felt no intense pressure from Elfa's smile across the dining table—just a beautiful woman with a warm voice, almost too young to be called a mother, enjoying a meal with her daughters. The fear Violette felt last night seemed like an illusion, and she could *almost* be convinced that it was all just a bad dream, except...

Burned into her memory was the image of Marin, shaking and grimacing in pain as she begged Violette to stay safe. That part was *certainly* no dream. So panicked and scared was Marin that she practically regressed to childhood; it was nothing like Violette had ever seen from her before. It was this memory of her maid that kept her from shrugging off her fears.

Times like these, when she was guarded and fearful of an unseen threat, there was one person who came to mind. One person she dearly wanted to run to. They didn't even need to talk—she just wanted to see his smile. It was enough to reassure her that no matter how scared she was, she could always go to him in times of need. If she couldn't see

him today, then perhaps they could schedule something. With that thought, she took another micro-bite of toast.

“Miss Violette, you’ll be coming home early today, won’t you?” asked Elfa.

“Wh-what?”

“Remember when I came by last night? We agreed to have a tea party today.”

Choking down her bite of food, Violette thought back to their conversation. As Elfa was leaving, she had mentioned something about desserts without waiting for an answer. Did that really count as an *agreement*? The intense fear had driven it from her mind until now. Frankly, she’d assumed Elfa wasn’t actually serious about the offer.

“What, just the two of you? Lucky! I want to have a tea party with Violette too!”

“*You* have a study group to attend, Mary. Besides, Miss Violette has been skipping family meals to make time for extra studying, so I daresay she’s earned a treat. Isn’t that right?” Elfa asked, glancing at Violette. Smoldering embers glowed deep in her eyes—the same serpentine eyes Violette had witnessed last night but reined in. These were the eyes of a tyrant who could steal away her agency in a single instant. “I’m dearly looking forward to it, so I hope you’ll come home straightaway.”

“Yes, of...course.” Something was choking the breath from her lungs, and she could not defy it.

Satisfied with the answer, Elfa shifted her gaze from Violette to Maryjune, listening attentively as her daughter babbled away. At last, Violette’s crucified lungs were free to breathe again, but she could feel her protective walls starting to collapse. Willing herself not to tremble, she could only watch the exchange between Elfa and Maryjune, their bond far more “sisterly” than she could ever hope to achieve.

Chapter 128: Tantrum

AFTER THE LONG, excruciating breakfast, Violette no longer

had time to experiment with her hair, so she wore it to school in her usual style. Honestly, even if she *weren't* pressed for time, she wouldn't have had the mental composure to say thank you, and Marin deserved better than that.

Instead, Violette practically fled from the Vahan house, then searched the relatively deserted campus for a quiet place to catch her breath. The classroom wouldn't do, since her thoughts would be interrupted every time someone walked in. Ultimately, she settled for the same corner of the courtyard where she used to sit by herself every day. Emphasis on *used to*. It felt like eons had passed since she last came here.

Funny... I really haven't known Rosette all that long, have I?

Rosette was a friend Violette had made purely by chance, and she was truly a beautiful person. She was kind but not too passive; good-hearted but not self-righteous. Be it her country's culture or the way she was raised, Rosette always knew where to draw the line—as if she could see Violette's boundaries with her own two eyes. Not once had she invaded Violette's privacy.

I'll need to go talk to her later.

Thus far, they always ended up finding each other after school, but evidently today had other plans in store for Violette. She'd only just arrived on campus, yet she was already dreading the thought of going home.

I don't want to. I'm scared. I want to study with Rosette. If only she could have stayed a child, selfish and impatient. Maybe then she could have pushed back with that sort of ignorant tantrum. Without that capability, she was functionally a slave to the Vahan household, and if she didn't give them what they wanted, she was in for a world of hurt. By this point, however, she had gotten so used to the unfair treatment that she no longer got angry. She was expected to ignore her personal feelings and put her own head on the chopping block.

“It’ll be okay,” she muttered, pressing her clasped hands to her forehead and taking deep, steadying breaths.

Something was scaring her, but she didn’t know what. Only she and Marin understood it; if she tried to tell anyone else, they’d just give her a funny look. It was like the subconscious fear of falling incurred by peering into a bottomless pit. There was no way to erase this feeling, so her only options were to endure it, forget it, or accept it.

“It’ll be okay.”

Just then, as her heart thumped erratically in her chest, she struck upon a sudden impulse: *I want to see Yulan*. All she needed was to see his face for a few seconds and she’d surely find her courage again. If only he would call her name, it would give her the strength to keep trying. She didn’t know what time he usually came to school in the mornings, so maybe she’d have better luck between classes. She knew they both had other plans for lunch and after school.

Closing her eyes, she envisioned Yulan smiling and waving. Knowing him, he’d start jogging over, so she figured she may as well beat him to it. How would he react if she told him she wanted to see him?

“It’ll be okay,” she repeated. This time, she meant it.

After third period was a ten-minute break that Violette decided to use to visit Yulan’s classroom. Praying she wouldn’t bump into Maryjune, she crept along the hallway wall and covertly peeked into the room.

He’s not here?

Due to his height, she could pick him out from a crowd in seconds flat, so there was no chance that she had simply overlooked him. He wasn’t at his desk, nor was he anywhere in the room. Then again, there was no guarantee that she would find him here. They hadn’t arranged to meet up, after all.

Truth be told, she was gutted by this—emotionally devastated, even. Still, she couldn’t do anything about it; she could only blame her own poor timing. Slumping her shoulders, she turned to walk away...

when someone spotted her and sauntered over.

It was Gia, grinning cutely, his silver hair sparkling. As he raised a hand in greeting, he cocked his head. "Whatcha doin', Miss Vio?"

"Oh, hello, Gia. I just, er... Where's Yulan?"

She started to tell him that she came by to see Yulan but then thought better of it. Not solely because she didn't want a close friend of his finding out about her crush on him either—it felt like such a cheesy thing to say! Unable to think of a better excuse, she faltered...though, evidently, this wasn't what gave Gia pause. He wasn't outright suspicious of her, but he looked confused, like something wasn't adding up.

"You know Yulan's not at school today, right?"

"What?"

"You didn't? Huh. Thought for sure he'd tell ya." Apparently this was the source of confusion. Scratching his head, he searched for the words to explain. "See, it was kind of a last-minute thing, what with the timing and all. I think he'll be back in two or three days."

"Oh...okay..."

Maryjune hadn't mentioned it at breakfast, so did something come up first thing in the morning? Or was Gia the only person he bothered to tell? More importantly, why was *she* so stunned by this? Maybe he never had a chance to tell her. They hardly ever talked these days.

"You need him for somethin'? If it's urgent, I can pass it on."

"Oh, no, that's okay. Thank you, though."

"A'ight then."

Waving goodbye to Gia, Violette turned and headed away from the first-year classrooms. Her brain was malfunctioning, and now she was overflowing with a dozen different emotions. *Why isn't he here?*

Based on Gia's remarks, it didn't sound like he was sick; it was something that was planned in advance. But Violette didn't know a thing about it. Had he been keeping it a secret from her, or was there really no opportunity for him to tell her? Either way, it was his business, and she wasn't upset with him. No...her devastation stemmed from something else entirely.

I wanted to see him.

Why did her heart feel so heavy? Was it because she didn't get the reassurance and encouragement she wanted? Partly, yes, but most of all, she was ashamed of herself for taking Yulan for granted. She could imagine herself walking out of his life just fine, yet somehow couldn't fathom the reverse? It was arrogant and pathetic. She was so vehemently disgusted with herself, she wished someone would bury her alive.

I'm so shallow!

All this time, she told herself it would always end in heartbreak. Told herself she wanted to be there whenever he finally found his soul mate. Pretended she could be the supportive older sister to hide her pain. But in reality, the second he pulled away from her of his own accord, she was ready to throw a temper tantrum. Did she expect him to stick around for however long it took her to come to terms with it? How unbelievably selfish.

Commanding her quavering legs not to give out, she stumbled away. Ultimately, she made it back to her classroom before the bell rang, but the self-loathing in her heart persisted.

Chapter 129: Reignition

“COME ON IN and sit wherever you like!”

“Sure...”

The welcoming smile did little to ease her nerves as she trudged into the parlor. This room hadn’t changed much since the days when Bellerose was alive, though the myriad childhood photos of Auld had been swapped out for family portraits instead.

After school, Violette came straight home. When she explained the situation to Rosette at lunchtime, something about the look on her face must have scared the girl, because she asked repeatedly whether Violette was okay. Granted, she was despairing far more about Yulan’s absence at the time.

Now that she was here, however, it was every bit as terrifying as she had imagined. She sat on the very edge of the sofa, as close to the door as possible, and looked down at the well-dressed table. The tea and desserts carried in by the servants were sure to taste wonderful. If only she were alone right now, she would have gladly reached for them. But at the moment, she had no confidence that she could hold down a single bite.

“There’s plenty for both of us, so don’t be shy.”

“Thank you.”

She knew she couldn’t simply sit there in silence, so she reached for the nearest cup. The tea was tinged red and smelled fruity—not a blend she had much experience with, since she preferred creamy milk teas. She suspected this blend was Elfa’s favorite.

As the woman smiled at her across the table, Violette raised her cup to her lips again and again, desperate to mask the silence. The tea was tart but not altogether unpleasant. It just wasn’t her personal preference. *I wish I were drinking warm milk.*

The table was covered in decadent cakes from the country’s most renowned bakeries, but what Violette craved most of all was the familiar taste of Chesuit’s simple, sweet desserts. He was a veteran chef,

but only in recent years did he learn to bake, and it was expressly for Violette's enjoyment. For this reason, he seemed to think of himself as an amateur, though his attempts were always top-notch in her eyes.

Can we get this over with already?

She thought back to the tearful expression on Marin's face when she went into her bedroom to change out of her uniform after school. *Don't go*, her pained expression had seemed to say. Violette had put on her best smile as if to suggest everything was fine, but she suspected it wasn't very effective.

So, how was she supposed to brace herself against this woman?

With her father, she knew to expect verbal attacks and that trying to talk to him was useless because any pushback would only further fuel the flames. With Maryjune, there was never any malice—which was an annoyance in and of itself, but at the very least, Violette could be confident that nothing was ever meant as an attack. In both cases, they could be dealt with by giving them the answer they wanted. As long as she suppressed her emotions and played along, the problem would go away on its own.

Elfa was different. The longer Violette spent around her, the more suffocated she felt. It was like being back in that prison cell all over again. She couldn't read the woman at all, and it frightened her. If there was any hostility between them, Violette would surely detect it—yet she came up empty-handed.

Considering their relationship to one another, Elfa had every right to despise her. Frankly, it would be a lot easier for everyone if she wore it on her sleeve like Auld. All this time, Violette was certain Elfa had chosen the path of apathy, but now suddenly she was making overtures like they were *friends*, rather than total strangers who shared the same house. At the same time, she could sense that what the woman offered was *not* pure kindness. So what did she want?

"You see, Miss Violette," Elfa began suddenly, making Violette flinch, "I always wanted to meet you."

As she spoke, she rose to her feet, walked over, and sat down right beside Violette. It was a large sofa, so there was plenty of room for two, yet Elfa was close enough that their pinkies were practically touching. Her untainted smile filled Violette's vision.

"To tell the truth, I've always wanted to chat with you. But Auld,

he...he can't stand the thought of Mary and I being around you. It's so unfair, don't you think?"

Violette tried to edge away, but Elfa closed in. With her back against the armrest, there was nowhere to run. Long, delicate fingers reached out and cupped Violette's cheek—soft, pale, and frighteningly cold. Again and again, they traced the curves of her face down to her jaw; when she tried to turn away, they held her firmly in place.

"Ah, I knew it..."

Her blue eyes were feverish, shimmering like molten metal as they gazed into Violette's. It seemed the embers from this morning had reignited...or perhaps they had been burning out of control all along. Then, with her other hand, Elfa gingerly traced Violette's eyelids, as if admiring a fragile treasure. And all the while, she was smiling—sweetly, gleefully, innocently, like a child. Beneath the maternal mask, with her sickeningly sweet fragrance and her rapturous gaze, Elfa was a carbon copy of the specter that haunted Violette's childhood.

Now she understood what she and Marin had been so afraid of.

"You really do resemble him, don't you?"

This woman was the same nightmare all over again.

Chapter 130: Mirror

STROKING HANDS, probing eyes, the voice that called her name—all of them were chains tying her down. If she tried to struggle, the weight would tear her limbs off. The loving gaze, voice, caresses—all of it was sickening. As she sat there, frozen in place like a doll, she cursed the horrid smile ogling her.

If I tried to call for help, what would I even say?

She seemed to remember asking herself the same question back then too.

The tea party must have ended on a happy, peaceful note. Elfa was in high spirits the entire time, smiling away next to Violette on the sofa. Sometimes the woman would reach out and stroke her hair or face, but Violette could sense that there was no ulterior motive to it. Unlike Bellerose, Elfa wasn't expecting a stand-in for her beloved. Even if she were, Violette no longer resembled her father as strongly as she once did; if she tried to cross-dress at this age, she'd look like an attractive androgyne, not Auld.

Elfa never demanded anything—just kept lavishing her with incomprehensible affection. Was this the same “love” she always thought she wanted so badly? Thick, cloying, and bitter enough to make her tongue go numb? She wanted to cough it up but was forced to swallow it lest she be left unable to breathe.

After two hours of Elfa playing tea party with her new doll, it mercifully came to an end—all smiles, no complaints, no awkward tension. It was peaceful and beautiful...at the expense of Violette's humanity.

After she left the parlor, Violette headed straight to the bathroom—specifically, a small restroom in a secluded corner of the house that had been reserved for her exclusive use since well before Bellerose died.

It was barely half the size of all the other bathrooms but more than big enough for one person. Furnished with a clawfoot bathtub and stocked with the bath amenities Marin had assembled, it was Violette's second favorite room in the house after her bedroom.

Stumbling inside, she clung to the polished sink counter. Her stomach was a jumbled mess, causing her to retch with each wave of nausea. She vaguely remembered someone once warning her never to vomit in a sink, but she didn't have the bandwidth to worry about such things. Fortunately, her stomach was empty.

Disgusting, disgusting, disgusting, disgusting! Her arms, her legs, her hair, her eyes—every last inch of her, from head to toe, *sickened* her. If only she could puke up the very blood that ran in her veins. But all that hit the sink was bile and a spatter of convulsive sobs. The nausea was relentless, yet she had no way to relieve it.

It would be so much easier if she could simply carve the heart from her chest. Maybe then she could replace all the blood at once.

With no hope of vomiting, Violette looked up at her own reflection, at the girl with the gray hair. Perhaps she was beautiful, intimidatingly so. Elegant and charming too. Maybe she possessed a level of beauty most people resigned themselves to never attaining. Maybe she was so utterly resplendent that she turned heads, stole hearts, and made people want to worship her.

Even now, at her most ragged, she didn't look slovenly—just *fragile*. No one realized what a curse it was: if she looked perfect at all times, then why would anyone ever feel the need to worry about her?

The cold, hard glass reflected her mirror image back at her; she traced the outline of her shape with her finger. Her hair color, the shape of her eyes, the impression she gave—yes, she could see the resemblance. Everywhere she looked, she could see traces of the loathsome man who loathed her in kind. And if *that* was where she got her beauty, then she wanted a refund.

Don't look at me! I don't want it! Go away!

Those were the thoughts that filled her head as she punched her reflection over and over and over again. Naturally, this did nothing to erase it, but she kept punching until her fist bled. Then, with a tiny *clink*, a single jagged crack sliced her reflection in twain.

She looked at it for a moment, then slowly slumped to the floor.

She couldn't feel the pain or the cold or anything else. She was so consumed with disgust, she couldn't tell if her senses were broken or fully functional.

Violette hated this house, her father, and her stepmother too. As for her sister, she held no grudge against her, but she would surely never care for her. She despised the prince who refused to love her, the "friends" who abandoned her, and the legal system that only saw fit to punish her and no one else. She hated God for forsaking her. All of it.

But before all of that, well before the events of the first timeline... it was this hair, and these eyes, and this body, and this face. Deep down, what Violette hated most of all was *herself*.

Chapter 131: Countdown

“**L**LADY VIOLETTE?!”

After the tea party ended and Violette still hadn't returned, Marin combed the house looking for her. She checked the parlor where the event was supposedly held, but it had long since been tidied up. Considering the distance between this room and hers, it was bizarre that Violette hadn't gone straight back to her private quarters. Next, Marin checked the area around Elfa's bedroom, but she found no trace of Violette there either. This was both a relief and an increasing concern.

At long last, after dashing around frantically, she found the girl in question slumped in front of a shattered mirror.

“Lady Violette, you're bleeding! We must treat your wound at once!”

Like a lifeless marionette, her arm hung limply. Blood dripped from her knuckles, leaving a small stain on her skirt. The wound itself looked less like a cut and more like blunt-force trauma...and there was a faint red imprint stamped repeatedly on the broken

mirror. These two details made it clear what Violette must have done.

Her pale, delicate hand was marred with purple bruises and scarlet blood. Gingerly, Marin reached out to touch her fingers as lightly as possible. They were as cold as those of an ice sculpture.

“Lady Violette?”

Try as she might, Marin could not rouse her. She brushed the hair from Violette's face and touched her cheek. Only then did Violette finally whirl around to face her. She looked to be crying, but her tears had dried. All that remained in her eyes was deep darkness, emotionless and empty.

This was the same little girl Marin couldn't save from the nightmare of her childhood. Violette had endured and she had prayed, but in the end, she lost all hope. Her heart was trampled down flat until you could no longer even see the despair. She was young and innocent,

but at the same time, mature beyond her years. When she smiled, it was the most beautiful sight in the world...so why didn't anyone give a damn about her?

"Aah... No, no, no... Please, don't go..."

Now the nightmare was going to take her away. Right when she had finally regained her heart, it would consume her from top to bottom. It would rip open her old wounds and infect her memories. Desperately, Marin wrapped her arms around Violette and squeezed tight. She didn't care if her nails made creases in the girl's clothes—she clung for dear life, refusing to let anyone steal her away.

Please, stay here! Please, don't go back there! I promise, I'm not a powerless child standing on the sidelines anymore! Call for help! Please, let me help you!

"Marin...it's okay. I'm okay."

Okay? What part of this was "okay" in any possible sense?

"I'm not going anywhere... I'm okay. Come now, Marin, don't cry."

Droplets streaked down her cheeks; her sight blurred, and her nose stung. But what ached most of all was something in the very deepest part of her heart, something that had seemingly broken. It hurt so badly, she could scarcely breathe, and her hot tears felt like blood—proof of a crushing, gouging, wringing pain. To this day, Marin's most precious person in all the world only ever saw her as a little girl who needed to be spared the cruelty of reality. Violette was willing to let her guard down, to trust her, to love her...but not willing to let her share the burden of her pain.

On the day they met, Violette saved Marin's life. But from *Violette's* perspective, she had cursed Marin with the pain and suffering of the Vahan household. Marin could tell that Violette loved her and wanted to spare her from misery. It meant the world to her, but at the same time, it was heartbreaking. The feeling was mutual.

When you get hurt, it hurts me. When you're in pain, so am I. When you suffer alone, it breaks my heart.

It hurt that Violette couldn't see these things. But most of all, Marin despised everything that had broken Violette to the point that she couldn't even consider them as possibilities.

She can't stay here.

This house was toxic, and Violette's dosage was rapidly approaching lethal levels. There was no longer time to wait for her beloved prince to come and rescue her. Now that there was one less enemy in the house, this was the last chance she'd have to escape. Marin had hoped it could wait until after graduation, but once that despicable man returned, her strength would no longer be enough to shield Violette.

I need to find a way to get in touch with him!

With no authority or graduation certificate, fleeing by night would only get them so far before they were dragged back, kicking and screaming. There was no time to prepare or make connections. The only person she could count on was an accomplice who possessed both status and love for Violette. If she could reach him, he would surely put his life on the line to protect her mistress. Worst-case scenario, as long as Violette made it out safely, she didn't care if the crime was pinned entirely on her.

Just five days left until that man returns...

Would the fates shift toward heaven or hell? Her arms tightened around Violette as she vowed to put her thumb on the scale.

Chapter 132: Pawn

WHEN VIOLETTE WAS YOUNGER, she used to pray each night that she'd wake up the next day and the whole world would be different—that everything would change for the better, no one would get hurt, and she'd have nothing to fear. Then the sun would rise, and she'd find herself curled in a ball in bed just as she was the night before. It made her want to cry. The world never changed; it *couldn't* change. So she kept biding her time, pretending not to notice the corpses she stumbled over, as she waited for the day she never woke again.

“Morning, Marin.”

“Good morning, my lady. It's a bit chilly today.”

Sooner or later, one acclimated to the agony. The more often it happened, the faster the body learned to adjust. Then, eventually, the pain ceased to register at all.

The morning was so peaceful, yesterday seemed like a dream. The dawn broke, the rain let up—some people considered these moments hopeful, but for her, it was time spent cowering in fear of the next sunset or storm.

“I shall bring you a lap robe. If you don't need it, you can leave it with the chauffeur.”

“Thank you.”

“We'll also need to replace your bandage. Shall we do that before breakfast?”

“Afterward is fine.”

“Very well. The food is ready, so I'll bring it in.”

After yesterday, Violette knew she wouldn't be able to endure another meal with those people, and Marin seemed to intuit this as well. Behind the maid's faintly swollen eyelids, the events of yesterday replayed over and over.

Violette's right hand was bandaged neatly, making her pale skin look even sicklier. At the very least, it didn't hurt...unless that was due

to numbness. Yesterday, it was swollen and bleeding, and Marin looked distraught the entire time she administered first aid, but evidently the wound itself wasn't as bad as it looked. They had already confirmed that no bones were broken. *Seems to be working fine*, she thought to herself as she clenched and unclenched her fist—though it was hard to say how it would hold up after a full day of schoolwork.

Marin was worried about the wound leaving a scar, but Violette didn't much care. Back during her days as a boy, she was perpetually covered in scrapes, all of which healed over time. She spent her childhood as energetically as Auld supposedly spent his, suffering the same injuries. Additionally, sometimes her mother's nails would dig deep enough to draw blood. Yes, for someone who couldn't stand the slightest difference between Violette and Auld, she certainly seemed to enjoy inflicting wounds of her own.

Violette was no sheltered daughter—simply a doll in a toybox. Once her owner got sick of her, she was tossed away into someone else's clutches. Normally it was a good thing to be so desired...for a doll, that is. Unfortunately, though most never seemed to realize it, Violette was a human being.

What should I do?

She would need to spend, at minimum, another entire year in this house. She had a general understanding of how Elfa felt about her but couldn't comprehend what she *wanted*. At this age, Violette was a girl who took after her father, nothing more. She was no longer his spitting image, and nothing she did would ever close the gulf.

Elfa didn't need to turn Violette into a second Auld, to put it plainly; unlike Bellerose, she had the real thing. What did she stand to gain by using the child from her beloved's first marriage to create a poor imitation of him? Even if Violette were still androgynous, that string had long been severed. What good would come of tying it back together?

Either way, one thing she knew for sure: if Elfa wanted Violette, Auld would gladly offer her up on a silver platter. And at that point, Violette would lose any chance she had to escape this house once and for all.

My head hurts...

Something weighed heavily on her mind, interrupting her

thoughts. Every time she tried to think of what to do, a dull ache stopped her. It was as though her body were yelling at her to give up because it was all pointless anyway—spoken from experience, most assuredly. She knew she shouldn't listen to that voice, but her legs were rooted in place, and she couldn't cover her ears because her arms felt like lead.

Slowly but surely, the edges blurred and, like an ice cube in a glass of water, something lost its shape inside her.

Chapter 133: Crime and Punishment, Regret and Resolution

“TRAVEL SAFELY, Lady Violette.”

“I’ll be back later.”

Violette waved goodbye, her hand bearing the bandages Marin had freshly applied today—blindingly white and spotless beneath the morning sun. How many years had passed since the last time she needed to administer first aid? Back when Bellerose was alive, Marin was regularly replacing *her* poorly applied treatment with disinfectant and clean gauze to ensure there would be no lingering scars. Then, once Violette started to develop into a woman, Marin used bandages to flatten her budding breasts—so tightly, it made the girl’s ribs groan in pain. Unfortunately, Marin was still weak from malnutrition back then, so it failed to produce the effect Bellerose desired.

The day that woman lost interest completely, Violette stopped getting injured, save for the occasional tiny cut that was too small to even scab over. That was when Marin realized that the source of the injuries was Bellerose.

Back then, Violette’s back and biceps used to be covered in little claw marks, some of them so bloody and sore that wearing clothing over them hurt. It was the curse of this house: fear carved into her flesh. Traces of that toxic “love” still lingered in her body.

Wearing a reassuring smile, Violette climbed into the chauffeur’s car, and it departed soon after. As Marin watched it go, her laced fingers tightened at her waist. The more broken Violette became, the more she took on the fragile beauty of a glass sculpture. The chill was palpable.

Right now, the girl was weary. Her body still functioned; it still felt pain. Somewhere deep down, she was surely begging for someone to save her. *There’s still time.*

It had taken too long to reach this conclusion, and yes, Marin regretted the delay. But if she didn’t take action, those regrets would only grow. The path was clear.

Marin walked down the deserted hallway, carrying her cleaning supplies. During this time of day, most were busy with lunch prep or taking a break after morning chores. Marin herself had already finished cleaning Violette's bedroom, bathroom, and laundry. The broken mirror had been taken down, and now she was in the process of arranging for a new one.

Normally, it was around this time that she would start taking inventory of current stock or find somewhere else in the mansion to clean. Sometimes she would help Chesuit by cleaning dishes or taking out the trash. The kitchen staff handled stocking and prep work entirely on their own, but they could usually spare a few miscellaneous tasks.

Today, however, Marin was not headed in the direction of the kitchen, nor Violette's quarters, nor the servants' break room. No, her destination was a room that would normally receive no visitors in its owner's absence: Auld's study.

She had swiped the spare key from the control room earlier, then replaced it with a different key as a cautionary measure, but since no one else would need to use it this week, the chances of being caught were relatively low. Certain rooms, like Auld's office, were strictly guarded even in his absence, but the study had no access restrictions—it was just a room that he liked to use. When Bellerose was alive, it was locked up at all times, but now Auld kept the key, so no one ever entered it aside from him.

As Violette's personal maid, Marin typically never so much as went *near* the study. There was an invisible wall between Violette's servants and those that came to the house with the other three; the distrust was mutual. That tacit understanding formed boundary lines across the entire house.

Good... No guards standing watch. To avoid unnecessary suspicion, Marin played it casual as she walked up to the study door and unlocked it. If she glanced around, she'd draw attention, so she strolled straight in.

It was a stately room, with large windows and bookshelves spanning the full length of the walls. Something about it reminded her

of Auld, but was that simply because he liked to come here, or had he rearranged the room to his specifications? Since she never saw what it looked like in the past, she had no way of knowing.

The room was spotless, meaning someone else must have come along recently to clean it. Marin had brought cleaning supplies with her as camouflage, but now it seemed likely that her props would go unused. Luckily, this meant she could focus on her search.

“Ugh, there are so many...”

The sight of countless spines on countless shelves was discouraging, to say the least. Upon further inspection, however, she realized most of them were ordinary books—safe to skip over.

Yulan...Cugurs, as I recall.

Yes, Marin was here to search for Yulan’s contact information. As luck would have it, the last servant assigned to clean this room had explained to another, loud enough for Marin to overhear, that a new address book was to be stored in this room. She didn’t know what she was looking for, but given the aristocracy’s great love of hierarchy and family ties, surely *some* sort of name registry was kept around here. She scanned the spines, as quickly and quietly as possible, taking care not to touch anything unless it was expressly required.

“Bingo.”

She found it so easily, in fact, it nearly took the wind from her sails. It was inside a glass cabinet bookshelf—the most recent entry in a long line of thick binders. On the opposite end was a binder so old, the lettering on the spine had worn away, and it looked liable to fall apart at the slightest touch.

Marin had anticipated that the cabinet itself might be locked, but with a little force to counteract the considerable heft, she got the doors open with no trouble. After that, she simply reached in and pulled it out. It was every bit as heavy as she had expected. The scent of ink and paper wafted up to join the abiding mustiness of the stuffy room.

She was treading a line no servant should ever cross: violating her employer’s trust by using her position for personal gain. Her actions would cast suspicion and shame on every servant in the house. Most of all, she was breaking the law. But Marin didn’t fear her punishment. This was something she would never regret.

“Forgive me, Lady Violette...”

The only source of guilt was the thought of *her* finding out. The girl might cry, thinking she had forced her maid to turn to crime... Marin let out a long breath, exhaling the image from her mind. By the time she opened her eyes once more, her conscience was clear. She alone was at fault; her actions were willful and for her own benefit.

All I want is to see you happy...purely for my own satisfaction.

Chapter 134: Savior

THROUGH THE GAP in the door, Marin scanned around as best she could. Once she made sure no one was in the vicinity, she slipped out and soundlessly shut the door behind her. Then, after locking it up again with a casual air, she picked up her cleaning supplies and walked off, head lowered. In total, she was in and out within fifteen minutes at most.

She returned the unused cleaning supplies to their closet, then headed for Violette's private quarters. She had finished all of her tasks in there, but she couldn't think of a better place in which to hide from prying eyes.

"Whew."

The familiar peace and quiet relieved her of tension she didn't know she was feeling. Normally, one would think the mistress's quarters would be the most stressful of all, but to Marin, this was as much her sanctuary as it was Violette's. In spite of all the suffering in this house, this one room carried a handful of precious, happy memories.

Her expression rarely shifted unless she made a conscious effort, and as such, her face remained frozen in its usual stoic mask. But deep down in her chest cavity, her heart was working overtime, racing at the speed of light. It pounded in her ears so loudly, she found it hard to believe that no one else could hear it.

Then she heard a crinkling sound and remembered the scrap of paper in her pocket, currently clutched in her fist. With the gentle touch of a glass sculptor, she pulled it out and unfurled it. It was torn from her memo pad, bearing a scrawled message in the ink from her trusty ballpoint pen. Really, it looked like a tiny piece of trash from a wastebasket—and yet Marin felt her heart pounding all the harder to behold it.

Gingerly, she smoothed the wrinkles one by one, taking care not to smear the ink into something illegible. Written there was a string of numbers. This was the sole method of contacting the Cugurs household, and by extension, Yulan himself. *Now I just need to put it to use.*

She didn't have much of a plan in mind from here on out. All she cared about was helping Violette escape, and she hadn't stopped to think about anything else. Staying in this house would get Violette killed, and that was the one thing Marin was desperate to prevent at all costs.

Never before had she cursed her own powerlessness as much as she did now. No amount of love could keep anyone safe; no, what changed the world was money and power. She had known this all her life.

Yulan and Marin were barely acquainted, but she was firmly confident that he would take action to help Violette. Whereas Marin only had love to offer, Yulan had love *and* social status. It would be incredibly presumptuous of her to ask this favor of him, but she no longer had the leeway to twiddle her thumbs and worry about consequences. She needed power, if only for one fleeting moment. Just long enough to tear Violette away from this family's clutches.

After that, I'll entrust her to you.

Was it irresponsible to fling Violette into Yulan's arms? Certainly. But Marin trusted that he walked the same path as she did—that he wished for the same outcome. Marin saw firsthand the happiness that her mistress derived from his presence and the protection he provided from the outside world. But there was one place Yulan could not reach, and that was inside this demon's den. In here, only Marin could take action.

She suspected he didn't yet know that poison had taken root within Violette. Violette was the type to resign herself to misery, so she wouldn't dare reveal her circumstances to someone so dear to her. And there was no time to wait for Yulan to take the hint.

Tonight...sometime after evening would be good. Right now, Yulan was probably in class, and Marin wanted to make sure that when she took the plunge, he was around to answer the call. After all, if he had to call back, there was a chance it wouldn't be Marin who answered.

It was incredibly difficult to act when surrounded by enemies on all sides. But when one's workplace was fundamentally evil, one had no choice but to become a double agent.

Please let this work, she prayed, the paper scrap squashed between her clasped hands. Prayer came naturally to Marin, possibly as a result

of her church upbringing, but she wasn't particularly devout. It was merely a habit she had picked up over the course of her daily life. Honestly, if she believed in God, she wouldn't be here right now.

She forced herself to imagine what the best-case scenario would look like. She envisioned Violette smiling, safe and happy with her beloved. A world where she could love and be loved in return as a matter of course. How wonderful it would be.

In that scenario, it was hard to say whether Marin would remain at her mistress's side, but she didn't mind. No matter where she ended up, she would continue to love Violette. And as long as Violette's happiness was secured, the distance between them ceased to matter. She could always close her eyes and see Violette's smile.

Even if these feelings can't save anyone, they'll always mean the world to me.

Chapter 135: Hope

THAT DAY, Violette returned to the Vahan estate at the usual time...or perhaps a little late. Without a doubt, it was her reluctance to come home that caused the delay. When Marin explained that she had arranged for supper to be brought to Violette's private quarters, the girl smiled stiffly—relieved, yet anxious. Elfa's words were still poisoning her mind. Elfa herself hadn't been too serious about her request, apparently, because when Marin announced Violette's absence, she simply smiled and nodded. Her composure only made her more frightening.

She was attached but not possessive; she wanted to shower Violette with affection but didn't seek to tie her down. At a glance, she seemed like the ideal stepmother making an effort to bond with her stepdaughter. But Marin knew the woman's hidden motives were nothing so innocent as that.

"Chef Chesuit, have you already plated Lady Violette's meal?" she asked.

"Nah, not yet," he answered without looking up from his work.

"She says she isn't very hungry, so she'd like a smaller portion than usual."

"Gotcha. Listen, Mari, uh..."

He glanced over at her, and Marin recognized the question in his eyes. "She's not quite at that point yet."

"All right, then. If it does start looking serious, come and tell me," he replied quietly.

"Yes, sir."

Violette's lack of appetite was most likely caused by her emotional state. As far as everyone else knew, she was "sick," but it was only a matter of time before she fell ill for real. Though she was by no means a sickly girl, the mind and body were inextricably linked. When the heart grew feeble, so did everything else.

As the man in charge of Violette's physical health, Chesuit wanted

to start planning countermeasures as soon as possible. The human body was the product of its diet, and because the body and mind were two sides of the same coin, a healthy lifestyle could help heal emotional wounds. That was Chesuit's duty as well as his highest priority. Conversely, mental health was Marin's territory.

That night, the halls were as deserted as they were at lunchtime. After supper, Marin stacked up Violette's dirty dishes and carried them back to the kitchen, at which point she usually either stayed to help clean them or prepped for Violette's bath and post-bath needs. Tonight, however, that time was allocated elsewhere.

"Can you handle this for me, Chef?"

"Yeah, sure thing."

"Thank you. I'll be going now."

After a brief exchange, she sped out of the kitchen. She wasn't rushing on purpose, but her panic spurred her faster and faster. Around this time, everyone in the house was busy with their work, but it wouldn't last long. Once the kitchen was clean and bath prep was done, the servants would return to the halls once more.

Marin had always felt that a family of four didn't need quite so many servants, but that was because Violette handled so much of her life by herself. Ordinarily an aristocrat would have several assigned maids and butlers...but when Violette was young, Marin was the only servant Bellerose allowed anywhere near her child.

Her hurried footsteps were a mirror of her heartbeat. The sound itself wasn't loud at all—on carpet especially, it was muffled quite a bit—but through the lens of paranoia, it was *deafening*.

There were a total of three telephones in the Vahan house. One was located in the office where Auld worked, and another could be found in the workroom. These two were too risky for Marin to use—the first for obvious reasons, but the location of the second made it too easy for interlopers to overhear. Through the process of elimination, that left the third and final telephone, located in the mezzanine hall. Its primary function was to *receive* phone calls rather than place them, and as such,

no one really used it. As long as she kept her voice down, she wouldn't have to worry about being overheard.

Her arrival confirmed that no one was around. Marin could hear people off in the distance, but the immediate surroundings were reassuringly quiet. Of course, once the sun set, this same silence would turn eerie.

The hallway telephone was needlessly ornate in design, perched atop a clawfoot chest of drawers. It reminded her of the one at the church where she grew up, except much bigger and much, *much* heavier. Without support, her hand quickly grew tired of holding the receiver. She turned the dial, then cupped a hand around the mouthpiece. After a few rings, she heard the line connect.

"Cugurs residence," said a soft and quiet yet clinical female voice. Every syllable was so carefully enunciated, one could forget it was a phone call at all. Why was it so common to speak in a higher register over the phone? Was it a subconscious technique to preserve the other person's good mood?

"Terribly sorry to bother you. My name is Marin, and I'm acquainted with Lord Yulan, the son of the family. By any chance, would it be possible to speak to him?"

She recited her lines in a single breath. There was no time to pause and reflect. Her heart was pounding at maximum speed, making her skull throb, and every second of silence felt like an eternity. Fighting to keep her breathing level, she focused all of her energy on choosing the right words to say next. Sweat dripped from her brow.

There was an uncertain pause. "I apologize, but...Lord Yulan is away from home at present."

"What...?"

"I'm afraid he's not scheduled to return for another two days."

"Oh... I see..."

"If you'd like, I can take a message."

"No, th-that's quite all right... I'll call back another day."

"Certainly."

"Thank you for your time. Goodbye."

She bowed, though the other woman couldn't see her, and

returned the receiver to its cradle. It felt as though the heavy weight had transferred from her arm to her chest. Pressing a hand over her heart, she took several steadying breaths. Her mind was spinning with icy panic and confusion.

It's okay. Calm down. There's still a chance. Two days from now... Auld won't be back yet. I'm in the clear. As long as I can find time—

“Why, hello there, little Marin.”

Far worse than panic, there was perhaps no greater act of folly than the deluded belief that she had regained her composure.

Chapter 136: Unforeseen

“**D**ID SOMEONE CALL?”

“What brings you here, Lady Elfa?”

“Oh, I wanted to hear Auld’s voice. I imagine he misses me terribly.”

Her bashful smile was adorable—to someone else, probably. They were the ideal couple, every bit as in love as when they were newlyweds. As a result, they weren’t remotely cut out to be parents, but that was hardly a problem for *them*, now was it? In a rose-tinted world, dark shadows were irrelevant.

At the sound of Auld’s name, Marin willed herself not to stiffen. She couldn’t afford to let even the most minute body language give her away. Delusional people like Auld and Elfa could convince themselves *anything* was true, so long as they willed it to be so.

Marin’s actions were tied directly to Violette, and it was she, not Marin, who would be criticized for them. Such was the burden of authority. In this particular case, however, things were complicated: while Violette was her direct superior, Auld was

the one who signed her paychecks. That was what restricted her range of movement, and for Marin, it was a lot like being held hostage. She would have liked to kill the swine a hundred times over for breaking Violette’s heart, but she couldn’t even punch him.

“I must apologize for getting in your way, madam.”

“Nonsense! Perish the thought.”

She needed to divert this woman’s focus elsewhere—ideally, so she would forget the exchange happened at all. Surely an employer had no thoughts to spare for one measly servant, anyway. Better that she liken them to the potted plants in the hall: something to be glanced at for a split second before moving on. Thus, Marin sought to remove herself from sight as swiftly as possible.

“Well then, I shall return to—”

“So who were you talking to, little Marin?”

A cold sweat ran down her spine. Luckily the lack of a smile wasn't a dead giveaway, since a poker face was nothing out of the ordinary for her. She froze mid-bow, Elfa's curved lips barely within her upper field of vision.

There was no deeper significance behind the question, Marin assured herself; she would have asked anyone else the same. Presuming that someone had called the house, the owner of said house would naturally take an interest. Especially since any work-related calls were normally routed through the workroom phone instead.

Marin had prepared a handful of excuses for precisely this occasion, and yet she could neither remember them nor concoct a substitute. Was she always this incompetent in times of an emergency? No, it was one of her best skills. If only she were *panicked*, that and nothing else, she would have handled it a thousand times better. If this were Maryjune instead, for instance, her mind wouldn't have gone blank from fear.

A serpent slowly coiled itself around her neck. She couldn't feel it constricting, but her weak points felt uncomfortably exposed all the same. All she could do was stand there like a deer in headlights, unblinking, struggling to breathe. Every muscle in her body went tense. *Say something! Anything!* Her throat was suddenly an arid desert, and all that escaped was empty air—

“Mari,” called a gruff voice that made her flinch in surprise. Only one person used that nickname (if one could even call it that) to refer to her. She turned around to find a figure wearing a white chef uniform, designed for both cleanliness and flexibility.

“Chef Chesuit...?”

“Sorry I had to send you out here. All done?”

“Huh?”

“The mirror! You *did* order a new one, yeah?”

He scratched his head, ruffling his slicked-back hair as he stared at her with emerald-green eyes. He usually talked to her while he was busy working, so they hardly *ever* made this much eye contact. Not just that, but he would ordinarily never bother to explain himself more than strictly necessary. He was a man of few words, and he didn't care who

was left confused by it.

Then she realized he wanted her to play along.

“What mirror?” asked Elfa.

“Ah, hello there, m'lady. Apologies for interrupting.”

“Oh, that's quite all right. So what's wrong with the mirror?”

“It got cracked, I'm told. Probably from age.”

“Goodness, that sounds dangerous. Was anyone hurt?”

Marin could scarcely believe the eloquence with which Chesuit threaded these lies. He knew about Violette's injury, and surely he had put the pieces together as to how she sustained it, yet he managed to craft a cover story that concealed both while retaining a modicum of truth. One glance, and Marin understood all that remained was for her to fill in the gaps, and the alibi was airtight.

“No, my lady. No one was around at the time,” she chimed in.

“But I felt it was unsafe to ignore, so I thought I'd order a replacement right away.”

“Good thinking. Has it been taken care of?” Elfa asked.

“Yes, my lady. I've just submitted the order, and it should arrive in no time.”

“I was using the workroom phone, so I had to send her out to use this one,” Chesuit explained to Elfa. “Once I was done, I came to find her, but it looks like I was too late.”

“Oh, it was no trouble,” Marin replied. “It's all taken care of.”

“Good, good... Welp, we should both get back to work.”

“Have fun, you two,” said Elfa.

“Thank you!”

Chesuit bowed gracefully, then spun on his heel and strolled away. Likewise, Marin bowed too—all the way this time—then turned and gave chase.

Chapter 137: Wish on a Star

TOGETHER, THEY WALKED in silence until at last they were alone. Marin couldn't see Chesuit's expression from behind, but she could tell that he was matching pace with her. She had something more she wanted to say to him, hence she tagged along.

They headed in deeper and deeper. This part of the house was never especially popular—even the faint voices from earlier had vanished. In the silence, it felt like walking into an isolated dimension. But of course, someone with an intimate familiarity of the house's layout would know exactly where he was headed.

The two of them walked past the kitchen, through the pantry, and out through the servants' entrance to the backyard. This was a path Marin herself took during her workday. Leaning against the dumpster, Chesuit pulled a small pack from his pocket and withdrew a white tube, thinner than his fingers. One could be forgiven for thinking the man was a heavy smoker.

"Here." He offered the pack to Marin.

"Thank you kindly," she replied, withdrawing one and unwrapping it. Though these looked like cigarettes at first glance, the smell was a dead giveaway. Beneath the white wrapper was sweet brown chocolate.

The first time Marin saw Chesuit with one of these, she mistook it for a cigarette and complained to him that the smoke would make the laundry reek. She never imagined that he would stuff one into her mouth without a word—naturally, her immediate reaction was to spit it out, not realizing it was his homemade chocolate. That was the day he explained to her that he abstained from cigarettes and alcohol (save for cooking sherry) to avoid dulling his palate. To him, work and play were equal in rank.

That said, he only started carrying around chocolate as a pick-me-up for Violette. As a child, she wasn't allowed to eat without Bellerose's explicit orders, so Chesuit made an effort to sneak her little treats when no one was looking. As different as things were years later, he still kept

them on hand. Perhaps he'd taken a liking to chocolate himself.

"Thank you for...what you did. I appreciate it," said Marin.

"That was cutting it pretty close. Finished my work and you were nowhere in sight. To tell the truth, I damn near panicked."

"You noticed?"

He acted as though her objective, her plans, and her actions were all patently obvious. Considering she could never tell what he was thinking, she had assumed it was a two-way street in that regard.

"Judging by the little lady's current state and the way you've been acting, I kinda put it together. Just a gut feeling. But I guess I was right."

He didn't scold, rebuke, or admonish her—he was so calm, in fact, he seemed almost apathetic—but deep down, she knew he must have been worried. Otherwise, he wouldn't have gone out of his way to find her and throw her a lifeline.

The man wasn't the type to help anyone he came across; on the contrary, he strictly compartmentalized his work. Had he figured out what sort of sacrifice she was planning to make? Would he write it off as stupid, or worse, the martyrdom of a narcissist? It didn't matter—there was no stopping her now. She made no excuses but neither did she confirm his suspicions, choosing instead to remain silent.

Chesuit had his own view of Violette, of this house, and indeed of Marin. Likewise, there was a version of Violette that only Marin knew. He understood as well as she did that this house and all its warped priorities would never amount to more than a cold metal chain holding their mistress down.

"Just try to stay away from the missus," he said after a pause.

Marin flinched. "Do you...know something?"

"About her? I don't know a damn thing...or maybe it's more that I don't *understand* her. But the fact that I don't understand tells me something, y'know?"

This house was a wretched pit of misery born from unnaturally intense desire. Bellerose and Auld never saw eye to eye—they only ever focused on their own wants, and it was Violette who was forced to pay the price. No one ever asked why that was.

Ultimately, the fault lay with Bellerose and Auld. It would be insane to expect either of them to have the clarity to realize something was wrong. Plus, Auld had Maryjune blindfolded so she couldn't see a thing. Arguably her ignorance was itself a crime, but she couldn't be blamed for never questioning something she knew nothing about.

But what of Elfa? She knew all about Bellerose, and Auld, and Violette too. How was she able to accept it all without batting a lash? She ought to have seen through Auld's blindfold by now. Marin had so many questions, yet none of them had answers. All of it pointed to one thing: the mystery of Elfa was baffling indeed.

"I was so focused on the lord of the house, I never realized the one we should be afraid of is his *wife*," said Chesuit.

"Indeed..."

To conceal the strange discomfort spreading in her chest, Marin stuffed the rest of the chocolate into her mouth all at once. Then she tucked the empty wrapper into her pocket and looked up at the starry sky. There were dozens of flowery ways to describe it—a sea of jewels, for example—but all Marin saw was black construction paper into which someone had jabbed various holes.

She learned long ago that wishing on shooting stars never changed anything.

Chapter 138: Grin and Bear It

NO AMOUNT OF FEAR stopped the sun from rising on a new day.

There was no point in wishing to dream forever, for that wish would never be granted. Even in death, the true “eternal sleep,” there was no endless dream, only nothingness. Even if, after countless identical days spent miserable, one stopped hoping for something good to happen, as long as one drew breath, one could only keep dreaming, keep waking, keep living.

“Morning, Marin.”

“Good morning, Lady Violette.”

Marin took one look at Violette’s face and grimaced. Evidently, her complexion yet again left much to be desired. No matter how early she climbed into bed, by the time she finally drifted off, the sky had already changed colors. If she mentioned this to Marin, she was likely to be told that she hadn’t *slept* but rather *passed out*.

Violette didn’t care which term best applied, as long as it forced her brain to switch off. It was the fastest way to escape the kaleidoscope of images that haunted her mind. The downside was the perpetual fuzziness and lethargy associated with a poor night’s sleep.

“Your face is looking a little dry. Is it itchy?” asked Marin.

“Maybe it’s the cold air. It feels fine, though.”

“I’ll adjust your skincare regimen starting today.”

“Could you? That would be lovely.”

“Of course, my lady.”

The gentle brushing of her hair made her drowsy. Considering the bone-deep nature of her exhaustion, she suspected she had, in fact, passed out this morning. Her head was heavy, and her mind was too foggy to make any decisions. If she dived onto her bed, she would probably fall asleep within moments. Why was it that a fantasy always became so much more appealing with the knowledge that it couldn’t be done?

As she stared blankly at the floor, she heard Marin ask, “Would you like to rest for a while longer, Lady Violette?”

“No, that’s all right.” Even with her senses dulled, she detected the concern in her maid’s voice. Their eyes met in the mirror, and she forced herself to smile in spite of Marin’s frown. “I’m guessing breakfast is ready?”

“It is. The head chef was insistent on making all your favorites today.”

“Enticing. Well then, I’d better get going.”

She rose to her feet, checked her reflection one last time, and then left the room. As she walked, she stretched her stiff facial muscles, massaging them into the most natural smile she could manage. Then she traced over her lips with a finger. With no idea what it looked like, she would simply have to trust that it was the right shape. When she walked up to the dining room doors, they opened for her, leading her into the moment she was dreading.

“Good morning, dear sister!”

And right beside this beaming angel was...

“Good morning, dear. Did you sleep well?”

“Good morning...L-Lady Elfa...”

She could do nothing but wait for time to pass. Her train of thought had been worn away to numbness, so she abandoned it—for she understood that she need only grin and bear it.

Chapter 139: Better Off Not Knowing

IN A SENSE, school was paradise for Violette. Few external enemies, a prescribed set of rules, mediators in the form of teachers... It wasn't nearly as simple as could be described in words, but suffice it to say, it was a far more public venue compared to the hidden dealings of a family home. Here, everyone was mindful of how their conduct would appear to others. And thus far, not a single one of them was delirious enough to see any benefit to be gained in attacking Violette.

Reflexively, she took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. The burden on her shoulders refused to disappear, but she could *pretend* she felt a little lighter. This was the one place she could be at peace. She didn't especially like to study, but she would gladly keep her nose planted in the books if it meant avoiding that house.

School was her one opportunity to connect with her support network: her good friend and the love of her life. As it turned out, opening her heart to them was both more meaningful and far more painful than she ever imagined.

It's been a while since I was last here by myself.

Until recently, she used to haunt all the most deserted corners of campus on rotation. She knew her mere presence was enough to draw attention, and she couldn't risk anyone making the wrong comment within earshot and causing her to lash out like before. She was certain she didn't have the fortitude to shrug it off. That was how she came to meet Rosette and, through her, discovered the fun and importance of bonding with others.

"I'm bored..."

Her own words made her giggle. She never imagined the day would come that she'd find being alone *worse* than having company! If this was boring, then that proved how much fun she had with Rosette. The thought of someone like herself having fun was... Honestly, it was kind of silly, but she found it kind of touching too.

Had someone told her a year ago that she'd enjoy herself this much, she would have scoffed at the thought, disgusted with herself for

“getting lazy.” After all the pain she’d gone through, could she afford to trust anyone? No one ever loved her or needed her—so was she really going to put herself out there with all those vulnerable feelings? She knew she’d only get her heart broken all over again.

Yes, the old Violette would almost certainly yell at her to quit while she was ahead. She used to believe without question that no one loved her, and in reality, she was right. It wasn’t all that long ago either. She was still the same age as she was then—except now she was on a different timeline. Now she knew the joy of having a real friend... and the sweet bliss of infatuation with someone she considered a brother.

I wonder what they’re up to right now.

Had Yulan stayed home today as well? She didn’t know what was going on with him, but at least he wasn’t sick. As for Rosette, Violette may have declined her invitation, but that didn’t mean the princess was spending lunch alone; presumably she was somewhere else with her other group of friends. Thanks to Elfa, Violette couldn’t even see her after school anymore—and since they were in two different classes, this brought the time they spent together down to zero. If they hadn’t met at the gazebo that fateful day, they’d never have crossed paths.

But if she saw me in this state, it’d only make her worry.

Smiling, she shook her head at herself. *Good heavens, I don’t sound like myself anymore.* She used to be the sort of girl who wanted to be the top priority at all times, but now here she was, fretting about being an imposition.

Well, I’d better head back.

Deserted places made it easy to forget the passage of time; if she didn’t consciously make an effort, she would end up running late. She rose to her feet, then walked across the courtyard and back into the school building. Judging from the number of students no longer in the process of eating, her sense of time was actually spot on. Perhaps it was some sort of subconscious skill.

“Oh...”

Through the far window, she glimpsed a head of pearly white hair, gleaming like an angel’s halo. No matter when or where, the sight of Maryjune always invoked imagery of peace and happiness. She was smiling amid a cluster of other students—her study group, perhaps,

given that Gia was a short distance away.

The group seemed surprisingly large, possibly because Violette never stopped to identify anyone except Yulan and Gia. Even if she didn't know their names, Yulan's height and Gia's tanned skin would catch her eye regardless. Speaking of Yulan, he was nowhere in sight, which suggested he had once again stayed home...but if he *were* standing there, how would it make her feel to see them together?

She averted her eyes from her feelings and the group as a whole. Sometimes she was better off not looking at these things—or not knowing, or playing dumb, as the case may be. As long as she didn't realize she was wounded, she need never feel the pain.

Chapter 140: A Beautiful Dream

YULAN PROGRESSED CAREFULLY, cautious not to let his guard down, and the resulting outcome satisfied him. Granted, it took more time than he anticipated, but it was worth it—all went according to plan. He had won.

Now all that's left is to tell you... I just hope you're as happy as I am.

The scenery through the window swayed with the vibrations. Who was it that said looking in the distance helped circumvent motion sickness? Or had he merely read it in a book somewhere? He rarely ever had the opportunity to travel great distances, so he had forgotten until now.

A hint of deep indigo was creeping into the sunset. Night would soon fall, and by the time he arrived back at home, the sun would surely be on its way back up. The journey took a great deal more time than he had spent at his destination, yet somehow this felt like the “easy” part—likely an indication of how he felt about the man he went to see. All in all, it was a stressful year. Possibly the most stressful year he would ever live through.

Man, I'm beat.

With stiff shoulders, a headache, and a pervasive feeling of lethargy, he was on his last legs. The sleep deprivation wasn't helping, and he was aware that he'd been skipping a few too many meals. But none of that mattered. He was content.

This was something he had wanted for a long, long time, well beyond the past year. Though he had kept the feelings suppressed, deep down, he had always wanted to make this happen. He wanted to be the one to make her happy—he wanted to see her joy and know that it was his doing. In the last timeline, he didn't think himself capable, so he deluded himself into thinking he could entrust it to someone else. That was a misstep. When it came to something that important, he should have focused on reality over fanciful dreams and found a way to accomplish it all on his own. This time, he did precisely that.

Now to see if the seeds I've planted have taken root. In his wake, he

had left behind a tiny ploy that could only sprout in his absence. He didn't know how large it had grown, but there were a lot of good-natured folks who would water that plant without anyone asking them to. Kindhearted, self-righteous folks who trusted Yulan a great deal.

This particular scheme offered no benefit to anyone, and there was absolutely no justifiable reason for it. Were he pressed to name one, he could only say it was his way of getting revenge. For if making Violette happy was his first priority—and it most certainly was—then this was but a little cherry on top.

Perhaps a wiser man would have found it in his heart to forgive, but Yulan was content to stay foolish. He would never have made it this far if it wasn't for all this bitter resentment. If he were capable of *forgiveness*, he wouldn't have taken this route in the first place. If Yulan were the kind of person who didn't hate anyone and only ever wanted the world to be at peace...then he would have arranged for Claudia to see Violette's true nature, learn about her imprisonment at home, and ultimately choose her.

The prince *had* seen her beauty by now—there was a fondness in his gaze—and if Yulan had chosen to mention this to Violette, she could have attained the future she once wished for. But he decided against it, and for one reason: he held a grudge against Claudia for everything he did, even now. Yulan had no interest in regret or turning over a new leaf; these things held no value. Wasn't it time *he* got something out of the deal?

And so he made these arrangements entirely behind Violette's back, crushing her old dream in the process.

“Wonder if she'll forgive me...”

He imagined her reacting to his sheepish apology with an exasperated, yet amused smile. *Yulan Cugurs, you are completely incorrigible*, she'd say, like she was scolding a child. She always reacted in this manner whenever she learned of his wrongdoing: *You'd better not do that again, you dolt!* He envisioned her like an older sister...and then he realized how long it had been since the last time she chastised him.

The two of them were holding hands that day, and Yulan had been so eager to take the lead. But in his haste, they both fell to the ground, and as he fought back tears, she smiled and soothed him with a leaf stuck to her face. They were in a world of their own back then, with no one around to bother them.

In the time since then, that little boy and girl had grown into a young man and woman, too shy to hold hands or lean in close lest prying eyes get the wrong impression. Still, he was sure Violette would rebuke him no differently.

I hope she smiles, though...

Beyond the window separating him from the dark of night, he could see his reflection, framed by the lighting in the train car. It felt like looking into a monochrome mirror, so he lowered his gaze to his folded arms and crossed legs. Then he closed his eyes, embracing the erratic sway. He had failed to account for how badly his body craved sleep, however. In the next instant, his brain switched off.

And then, for the first time in a long time, he had a dream—a truly perfect dream.

There were two small children, holding hands and running through the trees. It was a dark and dangerous forest, the likes of which anyone with common sense would avoid on principle. Everything was a blur of green and brown as they passed by decaying birdhouses and gnarled old trees. Right, left, left, right.

There, they arrived at a clearing, blanketed with little violets like a purple carpet—the perfect picnic blanket for a couple of kids. There was no carefully manicured beauty like you’d find in a garden; it was merely a field of flowers, blossoming between the trees in spite of the mud and moss. When the seasons changed, weeds would sprout up, but eventually the flowers would return. The children traced pictures of the scene in the earth.

These violets bloomed and withered for no one but themselves, unassisted. Yulan had revisited this memory countless times to gaze at them. It was a mundane, peaceful, happy dream with no misery in sight...and it was beautiful.

Side Story: That You Were Born

“**W**HAT MARI USES the most, you say?”

“She’s turning twenty this year, isn’t she? I’d like to give her something special to commemorate the occasion.”

“Coming from you, little lady, I figure she’ll be happy with just about anything.”

“If it were that simple, I wouldn’t have barged in here to ask you!”

Violette scowled, legs crossed, and watched Chesuit as he worked. She was a pretty girl, made all the more gorgeous with her various accoutrements, but that beauty was wasted on this dull, empty kitchen. Though she was approaching adulthood, beneath all her haughty grandstanding was the same lonely little girl, wanting so desperately to love and be loved in return.

Violette was especially fond of Marin—arguably an extension of the responsibility she felt for having brought Marin into the Vahan household in the first place. She seemed to see her maid as a sister, and Chesuit suspected the sentiment was

mutual. But of course, to an old dog like him, they were both kittens at play.

“Sorry to say, I don’t know that much about her myself. I reckon you’d know more.”

“Granted, I do know her quite well, but she never asks me for anything, so...”

“Well, she’s a servant! She knows she’s got no business makin’ demands of ya.”

“Oh, is that so? Because *you* used to make all sorts of demands, as I recall. *Eat this, finish that...*”

“If those’re ‘demands’ to you, then I was right to call off your dietary education. Here, *bon appétit*.”

Placed before Violette was a stack of two pancakes. The butter and maple syrup were served separately, so she was free to add as much

as she liked—and by the time she was done, the pancakes were drowning. It was the sort of delicious mess a young child would be scolded for. She cut herself a small bite and popped it into her mouth; instantly, her lips spread in a contented smile. To Chesuit, it looked like heartburn waiting to happen, but to Violette, it was perfect.

In the past, he would have opposed this much sugar, since it was unhealthy and put her at risk of cavities. Whenever Bellerose requested food for Violette, there was never any thought given to nutrition, and the portions were based on the caloric intake of a grown man. Never before had Chesuit dreaded the thought of receiving a clean plate in return. Looking back, that might have been his first failure as a chef.

“Whaddya want for dinner tonight?” he asked.

“I want that egg dish from a while ago! The one with bacon, eggs, and salmon on an English muffin.”

“Ah, eggs Benedict. You liked it?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Glad to hear it.”

These days, Violette was the only person who ate in the dining hall. Bellerose was too sick to leave her bedroom, and even if she weren't, she wanted nothing to do with her daughter anymore. Everyone else was a servant and thus had no right to sit at the same table. Was Violette lonely? Perhaps she was...or perhaps she was numb to it by now. Either way, the most Chesuit could offer was a plate of food that was cooked exactly to Violette's specifications.

“So, what do you think I should get for Marin?” she asked.

“We're really going back to that?”

“I'm not letting you off the hook. It's the whole reason I came here!”

“My best advice is to ask her directly. Trust me, an old fogey like me ain't gonna know what to get a young lady.”

“I *tried* asking her! She said she didn't want anything,” Violette replied sulkily. Her slumped shoulders and unmoving fork suggested she was sincerely struggling.

“Well, Mari's not the materialistic type.”

“I know, but I thought I'd at least get her something practical...”

“I’m tellin’ ya, I’m the wrong guy to ask. Although, now that I think of it, she told me her pen stopped working the other day.”

As with her uniform and watch, anything lost or damaged could easily be replaced. Marin was by no means devastated by this loss, since there were plenty of spares in the antechamber. But at the same time, it was a gift she would certainly use. Knowing her, she would treasure anything she was given for the rest of her life, so all that really mattered was Violette’s satisfaction with it. Easier said than done, of course. If it were that simple, she wouldn’t have asked Chesuit for help.

“Get her a ballpoint pen. It’ll last her a good long while, so it’s the perfect gift.”

“Good idea. Maybe I could go shopping after school.”

“Ask the chauffeur, and I’m sure you can. Not like it needs to be a surprise, since you asked Mari directly, right?”

“True, but she never gave me a straight answer, so she might think I’ve changed my mind by now.”

“In that case, I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“Thank you, Chef. I’ll go shopping first thing tomorrow evening!”

Marin didn’t have an exact birthday—or rather, she refused to tell anyone when it was. Accordingly, there was never any set day upon which the gift-giving took place, and Violette surprised her with expensive consumable goods as if it were merely a random whim.

“I wonder what she’d like...”

“That’s the part you gotta figure out for yourself, little missy.”

And so, the next day after school found Violette headed downtown in search of the perfect pen. Alas, she still had no idea what she was looking for. This was her first time buying a formal gift for someone, and her biggest hurdle was not finding a pen but rather, identifying a *good* one. Helplessly, she scanned up and down the rows. Perhaps an expert could identify the key differences in their tips, but the only difference she could see was their color and shape.

I don’t even know what Marin likes in a pen!

Some people cared about affordability, while others prioritized smooth writing. Many who used pens every day preferred something with an appealing design. Naturally, there were also those who didn’t

care at all. Violette guessed that Marin was likely in the third category. It was only a work tool, and if it happened to be of high quality, that was simply an added bonus.

“Since she uses it for work, perhaps a fine tip would be best...”

Violette often saw Marin organizing schedules and taking notes; given that her memo pad was pocket-sized, a heavy stroke would take up too much space. As a student herself, Violette could easily envision the ideal features of a daily writing implement. That said, when it came to the overall feel and comfort of a pen, it was purely a matter of taste, and she had no way of knowing Marin’s preferences.

“If you have the time to spare, we also accept custom orders.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that sort of thing.”

The clerk’s soft smile was, in a sense, flawless—a well-honed “customer service” smile that sought to avoid discomfort or annoyance. But Violette had visited this store a handful of times in the past, and each time prior she had strutted down the aisles with her entire entourage in tow. She couldn’t imagine this poor employee was sincerely happy to see her return.

Whenever she came by with her posse, she would buy the most expensive items in the store without stopping to examine their actual quality. At the clerk’s suggestion, she once had a pen custom-made for her, but again, she only prioritized the most expensive options. The result was a writing instrument that was a nightmare to use, and ultimately, she condemned it to a drawer somewhere. This time was different. She would have to bite back her trepidation and make a decision with her heart and her own two eyes.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve decided,” she announced brusquely.

“Very well.”

The clerk retreated behind the counter, and once she was alone again, Violette felt herself relax. Whenever someone else was around, she’d always tense up with suspicion and mistrust, among other emotions. Nothing personal; she just wasn’t comfortable around other people. Yet she chose to surround herself with them regardless—because she knew the loneliness was far worse.

What would Marin like?

It was scary, having to make this decision on her own. No one was

going to tell her the correct answer, nor would they stop her from making a mistake. People often spoke of “gut instinct,” but how did they trust that it was right? The fact that she *liked* something didn’t automatically make it good.

If only every part of life could be as straightforward as a math problem with one single solution. Even if everyone else insisted her preference was the “right” choice, how could she possibly have faith in herself to decide? Far easier, if a bit limiting, to take orders from someone else.

That’s the part you gotta figure out for yourself, little missy—the kind, encouraging words of a man who never let anything get under his skin. Chesuit would never abandon her, but at the same time, he didn’t coddle her, either. He simply offered a word or two of advice, then waited patiently. He had watched over her and Marin for many, many years now. He had to know what he was talking about.

“I can do this,” she whispered to herself, steeling her will. Even if she couldn’t bring herself to trust his advice, she could take courage from it.

She looked at each of the pens in turn, picked them up, and tested them to feel their weight and see their ink. Carefully, she worked her way through the rainbow of colors, and before long she whittled them down to two candidates: a blue pen with a silver cap and a pink pen with a gold grip. The blue pen was boxy in shape—a bit masculine, one might say, with an ivy emblem on the cap. Conversely, the pink one was rounded and felt more comfortable in Violette’s hand.

Taking Marin’s preferences into consideration, perhaps the blue was the better choice. Her maid seemed to avoid cutesy things—not out of distaste but because she felt they didn’t suit her. However, if Violette were to choose this gift based on her own personal view...

“Excuse me.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to buy this one. It’s a gift, so I’d like it boxed with a set of ink refills.”

“Certainly. Would you like to include a message card?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

The clerk set out a pen and a box filled with little cards, and while

he was wrapping up Marin's gift, Violette selected a card that looked like a cloud floating in a blue sky. There, in the white space, she wrote a sentiment she had felt every single day since the moment they met nearly seven years ago—one she had always wished to convey.

To my beloved Marin: I am so very grateful that you were born.

Afterword

HELLO AGAIN! This is Reina Soratani. Thank you so, so much to everyone who helped this series reach Volume Three!

In my opinion, this is the volume where a lot of plot points are finally set into motion. Not just Violette's feelings, but Yulan's actions too—everyone has a dawning realization that something has changed at some point. I can't really describe it, but...the more gradual a change is, the harder it is to notice unless you compare it to the way it was at the start, you know? It's like that.

A second chance can be a blessing, because experience gives you the foresight to avoid old mistakes. But at the same time, it can make you biased. A lot of these kids struggle with that—Violette and Yulan both.

I always wanted to find a moment to talk about Yulan's past in the original timeline, and having achieved that in this volume, I feel a deep sense of accomplishment. That being said, I had originally meant to save it for much later, near the story's climax, but...well, these things don't always go according to plan. Right up until the very last moment, I kept waffling over whether to make him scream or have him utterly speechless. But Yulan has always struck me as the sort of character who struggles to put his feelings into words, so I ultimately left him silent. It was extremely fun to write him crashing to rock bottom.

There were two new characters introduced in this volume: Elfa and Chesuit. Well, technically they were there the entire time, but they never had any dialogue until now. In Chesuit's case, he was just "the head chef"! Back when I was writing Volume One, I never would have imagined I'd end up naming him.

Chesuit is officially the only "good" adult character in the entire series. Violette and Yulan are teenagers, and while Marin is legally an adult, her mental age is on par with Violette's. None of them are capable of trusting adults, so rather than having Chesuit act as a guardian, I wanted him to offer small hints here and there, leaving the final decision up to whoever happens to be listening. That sort of casual rapport works well with Marin and the others, I find.

Chesuit is not the sort of person who shares his love and kindness unconditionally, but I suspect he, like many others, has a weakness for Violette. He's overprotective in his own right, but it's hard to see because he's massively overshadowed by Yulan and Marin. Considering what all the other adult characters are like in this series, I was nervous to reveal his name for the first time, but I'm relieved to see that so many of you like him.

As for Elfa...she's still a total mystery. She's definitely childlike, but everything else about her is unclear. First Bellerose and now this... Auld has some trash-tier taste in women, doesn't he? Then again, at least he and Elfa love each other, I guess? Now that she's given us a glimpse of her true self, I wonder what's next for her.

From the bottom of my heart, I'd like to thank everyone who worked on this book with me. I never expected to reach Volume Three, but I'm truly thrilled and delighted!

Thank you to my editor, who tolerated my slow work speed; Haru Harukawa-sama, who has beautifully illustrated the world of *Bother You* along with the manga adaptation; everyone else in the editing department; and of course, all my wonderful readers! Thank you so, so much! The manga is available for purchase now, and it includes bonus short stories written by yours truly. Please do check it out if you haven't already!

Reina Soratani

February 2021



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